Communicative Listening in the Language Laboratory

Nani Tiono

Abstract

Language laboratory actually is advantageous for ESL teaching-learning process. In the language lab, students can improve their language skill, especially their listening skill, since most of the activities done there deal with listening comprehension. However, ESL students often feel bored when they study at the language lab because they only do monotonous activities there. Thus, teacher should make a lively lab atmosphere through interactive listening; that is, by creating communicative listening tasks for the students. Through this communicative listening tasks, students will not only listen, but also interact with either the teacher or the other students so that they feel as if they do the real life listening. These communicative listening tasks will also help students to improve both their proficiency in language components (vocabulary and pronunciation) and in language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

Keywords: *communicative listening, components of communicative competence, grammatical competence, strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence.*

In such non English speaking countries as in Indonesia, language lab has an important role in ESL teaching – learning process. The language lab is often used for conducting teaching – learning activities, especially for speaking and listening activities. Since students are still learning, they must get the right model of pronunciation which is ideally given by an English native speaker so that later, hopefully, students are able to produce the right English sounds. However, it often happens that the teacher is a non native speaker who sometimes does not realize that he/she gives incorrect stresses, intonation or pronunciation. Even if the teacher is an excellent one, he/she sometimes make errors in pronunciation because English is not his/her mother tongue. This problem can be solved through the use of the orthophonic device in the language lab. By using authentic recorded materials, spoken by different native speakers, the teacher can show the students "the near – ideal pronunciation of native speakers" (Huebener, 1967, p.13) and the different dialects. Besides, through listening to the recorded conversation, students will become accustomed to listening to different kinds of voices, such as male and female, old and young, coarse and fine which can always be found in real life listening. Therefore, students will not just listen to a single voice, the teacher's voice, like in a traditional classroom. In his book, Huebener wrote "the language lab can accomplish that which the ordinary classroom cannot. The use of orthoponic devices increases the quality and the quantity of the students' performance" (p.112); thus, through the language lab equipment, teachers can help ESL learners to improve their

mastery of the English skills they learn. However, instead of the advantages of using language lab for teaching – learning a second language as mentioned above, some teachers still find it is difficult to get the benefits of using the language lab. These teachers fail to create a lively atmosphere in the language lab. It often happens that students only get monotonous activities such as listening to the tape, repeating the sounds they hear or just answering some listening comprehension questions which they cannot do since they do not understand what they have heard. As a result, language lab is not a pleasant place to study, or it is only as a place to get cool air since it is air-conditioned. Students might feel bored and reluctant to do their activities in the language lab so that they neither improve their performance nor their competence. Since listening might take the biggest portion of language lab activities, teachers should create communicative listening tasks that can help students improve both their language performance and competence.

Though the main activities done in a language lab is listening, it cannot be denied that effective listening is interwoven with the other language skills so that good communication can be established. When an ESL student listens effectively, he/she will do communicative listening. He/she is not just a passive listener, but he/she actively takes part in the interaction as well. He/she would try to interpret what he/she has heard based on his/her background knowledge and his/her purpose in listening. Therefore, he/she would do the process of decoding in his/her mind. What is stored in his/her mind is the meaning, rather than the linguistic form, of the information or message he/she has heard. Therefore, to be able to decide what communicative listening tasks to be given to students, a teacher should know how the listening skill is related to the four components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence.

The first component of communicative competence related to the listening skill is grammatical competence. Canale and Swain wrote that grammatical competence is very important because if somebody does not have the grammatical competence or does not master the grammar rules, he/she will not be able to use the language lab meaningfully (Canale et al., 1980, pp. 1-47). "Grammatical competence reflects knowledge of the linguistic code itself. It includes knowledge of vocabulary and rules of word formation, pronunciation, spelling and sentence formation" (Scarcella et al., 1992, p. 71). In other words, grammatical competence includes the ability to understand all aspects of language dealing with vocabulary and mechanics as well as with morphology and syntax. The word 'mechanics' in grammatical competence relates to basic sound of letters and syllables, pronunciation of words, intonation, and stress in listening. Therefore, in order to understand what is heard, a person needs to understand and apply the rules of morphology and syntax; he/she should recognize the words heard and understand language mechanics that refer to natural pauses, stress and intonation.

The second component of communicative competence related to listening skill is strategic competence. Scarcella et al., 1992 wrote that "strategic competence refers to the mastery of the communication strategies that may be called into action either to enhance the effectiveness of communication due to limiting factors in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other components of communicative competence" (p. 72). Thus, by using the strategic competence, a person will act as if he understands the conversation he/she has with other person, although actually he/she does not. He/she might use the strategies such as topic shifts to avoid the conversation topic for which he lacks vocabulary to talk about, attention getters (for example: Hey! Look!) or pause fillers (um, let's see!). In listening, strategic competence
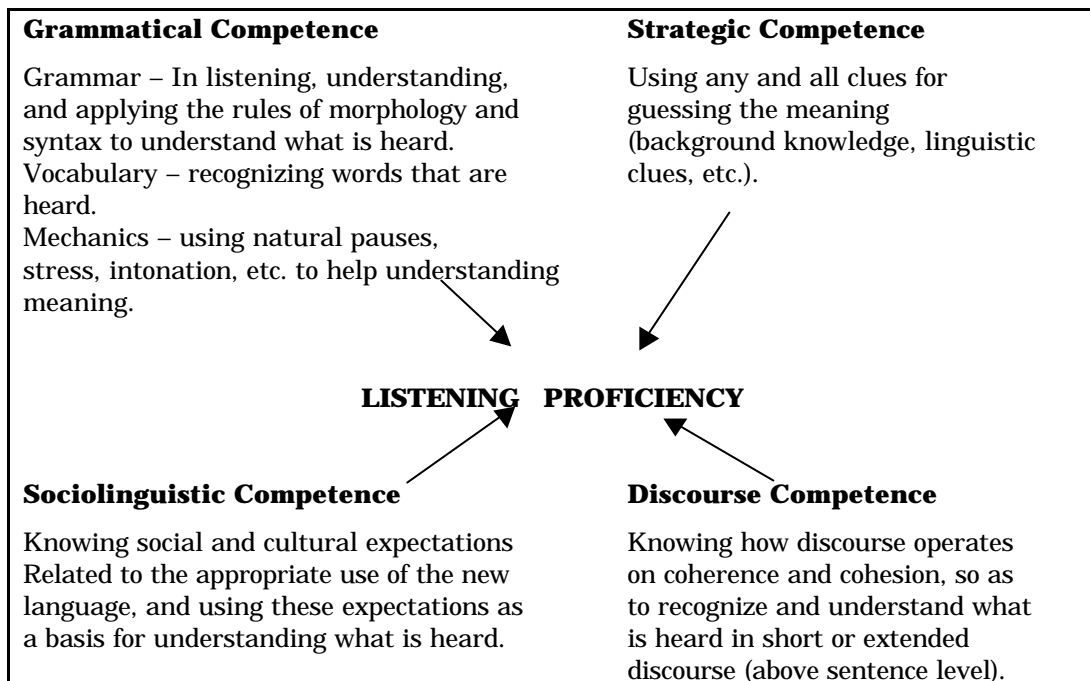
is very important since it involves guessing the meaning of unknown words, terms or expressions heard during the conversation. The listener might use any clues that he/she can catch such as his/her background knowledge, his/her linguistic clues, etc for guessing the meaning of expressions he/she does not know. For an ESL learner, guessing in listening is important so that the learner will not have the false idea that he/she should know the meaning of every single word if he/she wants to understand the overall meaning of an utterance. When a person is listening, he/she would "test out hypotheses" through "guessing from context clues" (p. 142); while guessing is actually important for hypothesis testing and comprehension monitoring. Therefore, guessing, which includes guessing the meaning of unknown words and guessing what would come next in the conversation, is very important in listening so that communication can progress smoothly. However, when it turns out that the guessing or the predictions are wrong, the listener should readjust differences and shift to a new hypothesis. To be able to make testing and adjusting hypotheses, the listener should have a high capacity of monitoring his/her own comprehension; that is, comprehension monitoring.

Sociolinguistic competence is the other communicative competence that relates to listening skill. "Sociolinguistic competence involves knowing what is expected socially and culturally by users of the target language." (Scarcella et al., 1992, p. 141). By having sociolinguistic competence, a listener would be able to comprehend the purpose of an oral communication. He/she would "listen between the lines" and adjust himself/herself to the social and cultural norms of the speaker so that he/she is able to find the speaker's purpose, to know the right time to comment, to ask questions during a discourse and to give appropriate nonverbal answers. Thus, the listener would have an appropriate understanding of the speaker's intended meaning.

Besides the communicative competence above, an ESL listener should have discourse competence in order to grasp the speaker's idea correctly. Discourse competence deals with the ability to communicate above sentence level; thus, a listener having the discourse competence would apply the rules of cohesion and coherence in communication so that he/she is able to catch the idea of what is being spoken or to predict what will be spoken next. Because of the discourse competence, a listener would become an active listener who would always relate parts of communication to get the right meaning.

To describe the relation between the four aspects of communication competence and listening proficiency, we can refer to the following chart.

Besides being closely related to the four aspects of communicative competence, an interactive listening, especially listening to authentic materials, can improve students' other language skills and elements. In order to grasp the correct meaning of what has been heard, ESL listeners should be able to catch the accurate English sounds that might not be found in their native language. The sound /th/ as in 'think' for example, does not exist in Indonesian language. In English, the sound /sh/ as in 'shall' would give a different meaning from the sound /s/ as in 'sell'; therefore, an Indonesian listener should know the differences. Besides the sounds, an ESL listener should also master the English stress and intonation since they are very significant. The stress would differentiate the parts of speech of a word. For example, the word 'record' with the stress on the first syllable /ˈrikôrd/ is a noun, while the same word with the stress on the second syllable/rek∂rd/ is a verb. Intonation would show the speaker's mood such as "certainty, doubt, irony, inquiry, seriousness, or humor" (Ur, 1984, p.13). Though it cannot be denied that the demand of the listener's mastery of the English sounds, stress and intonation might become his/her difficulties, at the same time, it would also cause the improvement of his/her pronunciation, and thus, improve his/her speaking skill.

Grammatical Competence	**Strategic Competence**
Grammar – In listening, understanding, and applying the rules of morphology and syntax to understand what is heard. Vocabulary – recognizing words that are heard. Mechanics – using natural pauses, stress, intonation, etc. to help understanding meaning.	Using any and all clues for guessing the meaning (background knowledge, linguistic clues, etc.).
LISTENING	**PROFICIENCY**
Sociolinguistic Competence	**Discourse Competence**
Knowing social and cultural expectations Related to the appropriate use of the new language, and using these expectations as a basis for understanding what is heard.	Knowing how discourse operates on coherence and cohesion, so as to recognize and understand what is heard in short or extended discourse (above sentence level).

The Components Underlying Listening Proficiency (Scarcella et al., 1992, p. 141)

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In listening, a listener also has to make prediction to keep the communication flow. This prediction might depend on the listener's familiarity with "the clichés, collocations, idioms and proverbs commonly used; for example, " 'rosy' often collocates with 'cheeks' or 'jaded' with 'appetite' "(p.16). However, sometimes the predictions also depend on choices of vocabulary or grammar; for example, when the listener hears the word 'but' or 'however', he/she would expect to listen to something contrasted with the previous one. Another example, an introductory clause such as 'There are two criteria for this' would show "a corresponding discourse structure to follow" (p.16). In short, through

interactive listening, a listener would also improve his/her mastery of syntax and vocabulary, as well as pronunciation; thus, he/she also improves his/her speaking, writing and reading proficiency.

As what has been stated before, to avoid boredom in the language lab, the teacher should give ESL learners communicative listening tasks. These communicative tasks are basically meaning-focused tasks that involve the learner to comprehend, produce and / interact in the target language, and the tasks are classified based on their goals, input data, activities, settings, learner role and teacher role. The 'goals' are not always explicitly stated, but it can always be seen from the examination of a task. While 'input' refers to the data used to form the starting point of communicative task and it can be taken from various sources such as picture stories, bus timetable, extract from a play, and so on. 'Activities' refer to what the learners will do with the input forming the starting point of the communicative task. 'Learner role' and 'teacher role' refer to the part the learner or the teacher has to play in doing the learning tasks. Learner role actually depends on the teacher's function, such as whether he/she functions as a guide, a consultant or a director. 'Settings' refer to the classroom arrangements used in the task; therefore, the setting of communicative listening refers to the language laboratory arrangements. Since each student in the language lab should listen to recorded materials or sometimes record his/her own voice, the students are bound to sit on their own booth, but they still can work together with the others just by moving their seats that are usually wheeled chairs or portable chairs.

Based on Nunan (1989), there are three main activity types that stimulate interactive language use. The first is information–gap activity. This activity "involves a transfer of given information from one person to another, or from one place to another – generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information or into language" (p. 66). One of the examples of this type is pair work in which each person in the pair only has part of the complete information; for example, an incomplete picture. Thus, the pair should communicate to complete the information.

The second activity type is reasoning–gap activity. This activity "involves deriving some new information from given information through process of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns (p. 66). This activity needs comprehending and conveying information as the information gap activity; however, the information to be conveyed is not identical with that initially comprehended since there should be reasoning to connect the two pieces of information. An example of this activity is deciding what course of action is best (cheapest and quickest) for a given purpose.

The last activity type is opinion – gap activity. It "involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling or attitude in response to a given situation" (p. 66). This activity includes the use of factual information and arguments formulation to defend one's idea; however, it has no objective procedure to say whether results are right or wrong and each person in the group might give different outcome. The examples of opinion – gap activity are story completion and taking part in social issue discussion. Thus, from the examples of the activity types above, it is clear that the focus of giving communicative listening tasks or activities to an ESL learner is on the ability to use the second language, and not to listen to the language used by others. Besides, the tasks should be reciprocal listening tasks; that is, the tasks should enable the listener to interact with the speaker and the listener can negotiate the content of the interaction.

In addition to what has been discussed above, communicative listening tasks given to the students could be taken from authentic materials; that is, materials which are not

specifically created for the purpose of illustrating or teaching features of the language such as those from radio / TV broadcasts or news program or other listening materials which have similar content as the authentic ones. Besides, the tasks should have the characteristics of good listening activities. In *The Tapestry of Language Learning* (Scarcella et al., 1992, p. 149), it is stated that a good listening activity has all or most of these characteristics:

1. The listening activity has a real, communicative purpose that is clear to the students.
2. It offers content of personal interest to the listeners.
3. The speaker is visible (in person or on a videotape) rather than invisible (as on an audiotape or on the radio) – unless the purpose is to help students understand audiotapes and radio programs.
4. Listeners are required to respond in some meaningful fashion (for example, saying something, following a command or request, asking a question, or taking notes if it's a lecture).
5. The listening activity offers many environmental clues to the meaning.
6. Listeners with typical background knowledge are able to understand the topic   of the listening activity; no highly specialized background is required, unless   the class focuses on English for special purposes (ESP).
7. The listening activity is "normal" for its own particular speech type; that is, a conversation would have short, redundant, rapid chunks of speech, while a lecture or play might be more formalized and orderly.

Since the communicative listening tasks require the listener to interact with the speaker and all the tasks are done in the language laboratory, of course the implementation of these tasks would be easier if the lab facilities or equipments enable students to communicate, either with the other students or with the teacher directly. Usually this kind of lab equipment consists of a master console that has:

1. Distribution switches to enable teacher to direct the recorded program to the selected student booths so that students can work in pairs or in groups. Students in the same group can listen to the same program.
2. Intercom switches to enable a two – way conversation between the teacher and any individual student so that the teacher can correct or comment if necessary.
3. Monitoring switches to enable the teacher to listen to any one student.
4. Group call switch to enable the teacher to give announcements to a certain group while the students in the group are listening to the program / tape. Thus, students are able to listen to both sounds.
5. All call switch to enable the teacher to give announcements to all students, but to stop temporarily the program / tape they are listening to.

Besides the different use of the master console above, each student booth should also be equipped with a tape recorder to enable students to record their individual voice to be listened to by their friends or teacher.

With the help of the lab facilities mentioned above, the teacher can give students communicative listening tasks. There are several types of communicative listening tasks which need different responses from the learners; each type of the tasks can be done in pairs or in groups.

1. Listen and follow (e.g. listening and following a route on a map or a way to a hidden treasure).
2. Listen and do (e.g. drawing what is described, labeling or ticking).

3. Listen and enjoy (e.g. extending a recorded story and giving an ending to the story).
4. Listen and complete (e.g. jigsaw listening, completing a chart or transcript or time table).
5. Listen and correct (e.g. amend errors in a summary).
6. Listen and comment (e.g. telling what is going on after listening to a series of sounds or noise).
7. Listen and discuss (e.g. discussing and solving a murder mystery)
8. Listen and recall (e.g. retelling the information or story that have been heard).

The types of activities above can be given to all levels of students, but the teacher should look for materials with appropriate level of difficulty for each level. In doing the tasks above, the students listen to a recorded material in which each student in the group listens to only part of complete information and discuss with their friends what they have heard to get the answer. For an advanced level, instead of using a recorded story, the students themselves can record their own voice, creating their own story as the material.

To avoid communication block when students are doing the listening tasks, the teacher needs to divide the activities into three parts: pre-listening activities, while-listening activities and post-listening activities. In pre-listening activities, the teacher explains what the students should do and elicits the needed vocabulary. In while-listening activities, the students listen and do as what is asked. In post-listening activities, the students check their answers with their friends and the teacher gives the complete answer or text.

Below are concrete examples of the communicative listening tasks which include the objectives and the types of activities:

Example I:

Title: Identifying Objects

Type of task: Listen and do (draw)

Level: Beginners

Objectives: - To enrich the students' vocabulary related to different kinds of shapes and physical qualities.
  - To help students practice listening to the description and draw the described object.

Activities:

❖ **Pre-listening activities:**
  ▪ The teacher prepares an empty cassette tape on each student's booth.
  ▪ The teacher elicits the vocabulary about shapes (e.g. round, triangle, oval, spiral, etc.), physical qualities (e.g. smooth, rough, flexible, rigid, soft, hard, transparent, translucent, opaque, etc.).
  ▪ The teacher explains what the students have to do.

❖ **While-listening activities:**
- Students work in pairs and each of them is given a different object.
- They may not see their friend's object.
- Each student will record his voice describing his object (e.g. what it is made of, what the shape is, what the color is, etc.).
- After that, the students would change cassette tape and they have to listen to his friend's recorded description of the object and draw the picture.
- They also have to mention the name of the object if they have found it.

❖ **Post-listening activities:**
- Students check with their friends whether they have given the correct answer or not.

Example II:

Title: Looking for a Hidden Treasure

Type of Task: Listen and follow

Level: Intermediate

Objectives:

- To enable students to follow oral directions and locate the directions in the written map provided to them.
- To help students understand oral instruction.

Activities:

❖ **Pre-listening activities:**
- The teacher prepares recorded material for each student's booth.
- The recording (material) is about a complete story of finding a hidden treasure and is divided into three parts.
- Each student will get only one part of the complete story in his cassette. The material distribution can be as what is illustrated below:

Booth:	A	B	C	D	E	F
1.	--	--	--	--	--	--
2.	--	--	--	--	--	--
3.	--	--	--	--	--	--
4.	--	--	--	--	--	--

Students on booths A and D will get part I of the recording.
Students on booths B and E will get part II of the recording.
Students on booths C and F will get part III of the recording.
- The teacher elicits the vocabulary related to the story.
- The teacher reads the names in the map so that the students will not have problems with the names later.
- The teacher explains what the students should do.

Example of the map:
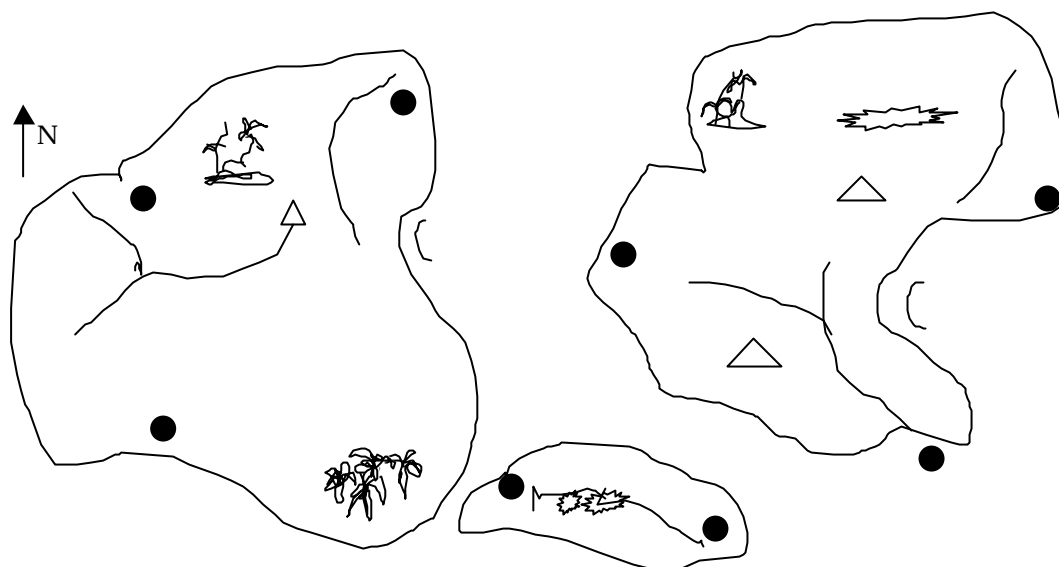
❖ **While-listening activities:**
  ▪ Each student listens to his own recording and makes notes on important details/places.
  ▪ Each student tries to relate what he has heard (directions to the location of the hidden treasure) with the map he has.

❖ **Post-listening activities:**
  ▪ Students work together in groups of three; each student in the group has listened to different parts of the story (e.g. student A listened to part I, student B listened to part II, and student C listened to part III).
  ▪ Each student in the group explains to the members of his group about what he has heard and what he can conclude.
  ▪ The group should find / locate the hidden treasure in the provided map.
  ▪ The teacher discusses the answers with the whole students in class.

As a conclusion, language laboratory actually is essential for teaching ESL students. With the support of a well-equipped language lab, well-planned communicative listening tasks and an experienced teacher, students will be stimulated to learn ESL in the language laboratory. Hopefully, they can get satisfying improvements both in their language performance and language competence.

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