

LISTENING COMPREHENSION PRACTICE IN THE CLASSROOM: PROBLEMS, SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and vocabulary, and grasping his meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously. (Howatt and Dakin 1974). School learners face to many difficulties while they are doing listening activities in English lessons. Real life listening situations help to make sense to examine what real life listening is, and to comprehend satisfactorily variety of situations. In this paper, the researchers reviewed the terms listening, listening comprehension, some problems which they come across and some effective structures related to overcome their listening problems.

Key words: listening, listening comprehension, real life listening situation, redundancy, non-repetition, problems, solutions.

Introduction

After getting the Independent the Republic of Uzbekistan has worked out own model of development taking into account the specific social and political traditions in country. One of the most important conditions for the development of any countries is a well-functioning education system. Today teaching and learning foreign language plays an important role in all sites. Every learners need to achieve language skills, especially listening. Because it is one of the most important skills as people learn a language first by listening to it.

Listening is a very significant language skill, not only for communication purposes but also in the process of learning a second language. When people learn a foreign language, listening plays a key role to all effective communication. Without the ability to listen effectively, messages can be inaccurately received and interpreted in the communication process which can lessen their effectiveness and, consequently, lead to misunderstandings. Listening can also appear to be simple or even secondary when compared to more active language skills, perhaps due to the assumption that it is performed without conscious thought or as a response to a stimulus (Morley, 1972).

Listening comprehension is defined as a complex, interactive process in which listeners are involved in a dynamic construction of meaning. Listeners comprehend the oral input through sound discrimination, prior knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structures,

stress and intonation, as well as other use linguistic, paralinguistic, or even non-linguistic clues in contextual utterance (Rost, 2002).

However, when learning a foreign language, learners come to understand that listening is quite difficult and even stressful at times since they are often unable to comprehend the contemplated meaning of what they are listening to (Goh & Taib, 2006). Therefore, as listening is a vital skill for foreign language learning, teachers ought to dedicate more time to teach listening.

In principle, the objective of listening comprehension practice in the classroom is that students should learn to function successfully in real-life listening situations. This being so, it makes sense to examine first of all what real-life listening is, and what sorts of things the listener needs to be able to do in order to comprehend satisfactorily in a variety of situations.

Characteristics of real-life listening situations

Most of the spoken language we listen to is informal and spontaneous: the speaker is making it up as he or she goes along rather than reading aloud or reciting from memory. Informal speech has various interesting features:

Brevity of chunks. It is usually broken into short chunks. In a conversation, for example, people take turns to speak, usually in short turns of a few seconds each.

Pronunciation. The pronunciation of words is often slurred, and noticeably different from the phonological representation given in a dictionary. There are obvious examples such as *can't* in English for *cannot*, which have made their way even into the written language. Less obvious examples include such changes as *'or right'* for *all right*.

Vocabulary. The vocabulary is often colloquial; in English you might, for example, use *guy* where in writing you would use *man*, or *kid* for *child*.

Grammar. Informal speech tends to be somewhat ungrammatical: utterances do not usually divide neatly into sentences; a grammatical structure may change in mid-utterance; unfinished clauses are common.

Noise. There will be a certain amount of 'noise': bits of the discourse that are unintelligible to the hearer, and therefore as far as he or she is concerned are meaningless 'noise'. This may be because the words are not said clearly, or not known to the hearer, or because the hearer is not attending - any number of reasons. We usually comprehend somewhat less than 100 per cent of what is said to us, making up for the deficit by guessing the missing items or simply ignoring them and gathering what we can from the rest.

Redundancy. The speaker normally says a good deal more than is strictly necessary for the conveying of the message. Redundancy includes such things as repetition, paraphrase, glossing with utterances in parenthesis, self-correction, and the use of 'fillers' such as */ mean, well, er*. This to some extent compensates for the gaps created by 'noise'.

Non-repetition. The discourse will not be repeated verbatim; normally it is heard only once, though this may be compensated for by the redundancy of the discourse, and by the possibility of requesting repetition or explanation.

Real-life listening in the classroom

The title above is, of course, a contradiction in terms: classroom listening is not real-life listening. However, in order to provide students with training in listening comprehension that will prepare them for effective functioning outside the classroom, activities should give learners practice in coping with at least some of the features of real-life situations. For example: it would seem not very helpful to base listening exercises mainly on passages that are read aloud and followed by comprehension questions, when we know that very little of discourse we hear in real life is read aloud, and we do not normally respond by answering comprehension questions (Nunan D. 1991).

Listening to the type recorder in the classroom has some advantages and also problems:

Advantages: less recorded material means less of the expense, inconvenience and occasional breakdown that the frequent use of tape-recorders entails. You can also adapt the level and speed of the text to your specific students and respond directly to their needs.

Problems or reservations: many teachers lack confidence in their own ability to improvise fluently in the target language, or are worried their spoken language is not a good enough ('native') model for students to listen to; such teachers prefer to rely, if not on recordings, then at least on a written text they can read aloud. However, most foreign language teachers, even if not native speakers of the target language, can present a perfectly competent improvised speech model; though many find this difficult to believe and are unnecessarily apprehensive! (Richards J. and Schmidt R. 1983)

Another problem is that if learners only hear you, they will not have the opportunity to practice listening to different voices and accents.

Finally, on the point of single-exposure listening: even if learners can do the task after one listening, you may wish to let them hear the text again, for the sake of further exposure and practice and better chances of successful performance.

Problems in listening emphasized by Field (2003) are those: Learners know the word, but get the wrong sense. Phonetic variations of a word mislead them (reduction, assimilation, elision,). Learners know the word in written form but not the oral version. Learners have difficulty to catch the word from a connected speech such as a dialogue.

The voice of the speaker also influences students' comprehension. Students who get used to the teacher's voice can easily understand him, but often they cannot understand other people's speaking the same language. Consequently, in teaching listening comprehension the teacher should bear in mind all the difficulties students encounter when listening in a foreign language.

These difficulties are of two types:

1) coming from the listeners; 2) caused by the listening material.

The previous problem students have involves:

- a) making prediction what the speaker talks about;
- b) guessing unknown words or phrases;
- c) recognizing points.

The next problem involves:

- a) unfamiliar topics;
- b) trouble with sounds;
- c) authentic material;
- d) colloquial words;
- e) can not understand fast, natural native speech;
- f) need to hear things more than once

Here are some helpful ideas defined by Ur:

1. Grade listening materials according to the students' level, and provide authentic materials rather than idealized, filtered samples. It is true that natural speech is hard to grade and it is difficult for students to identify the different voices and cope with frequent overlaps.
2. Design task-oriented exercises to engage the students' interest and help them learn listening skills subconsciously. Listening exercises are most effective if they are constructed round tasks expressing agreement or disagreement, taking notes, marking a picture or diagram according to instructions, and answering questions.
3. Provide students with different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, films, announcements, everyday conversation, English songs, and so on. Select short, simple listening texts with little redundancy for lower-level students and complicated authentic materials with more redundancy for advanced learners. Provide background knowledge and linguistic knowledge, such as complex sentence structures and colloquial words and expressions, as needed. (Ur, 1984)

Developing the listening comprehension skill in the classroom

Improving the listening comprehension skill is important for students, especially in a communicative language environment where activities often revolve around interactions between English language learners. According to Brown (2001), students, with well-developed listening comprehension skills are able to participate more effectively in class. For this reason, listening comprehension practice positively influences second language learning, and lessons based on this skill are regularly taught in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. . The teacher can facilitate the development of listening ability by creating listening lessons that guide the learner through three stages: pre-listening, the

listening task, and post-listening. The pre-listening activity should establish the purpose of the listening activity and activate the schemata by encouraging the learners to think about and discuss what they already know about the content of the listening text. This activity can also provide the background needed for them to understand the text, and it can focus attention on what to listen for. The post-listening activity should help the listener to evaluate success in carrying out the task and to integrate listening with the other language skills.

When teachers design listening comprehension lessons, they should follow some basic principles that serve as useful guides for successful activities. This article presents the rationale for some of these basic principles, including descriptions for (1) motivating students to focus on the learning objective, (2) maintaining the same topic and objective for consecutive activities, (3) applying appropriate teaching methods and techniques, (4) selecting materials for listening comprehension activities, and (5) using authentic materials.

1. Motivating students to focus on the learning objective

When students clearly understand the purpose of a particular listening comprehension activity, they will be better able to focus on essential vocabulary and grammar and listen for specific information. This will help them to complete the learning objectives in a shorter amount of time. For example, if the teacher informs the students at the start of a lesson that the objective will "understand directions," they can focus on listening for and remembering the vocabulary associated with giving directions. If students are unaware of the objective for a lesson, they may be able to complete a simple activity requiring a "Yes" or "No" answer, but they may not remember specific vocabulary used in giving directions or be able to reiterate specific phrases in more open-ended activities. As a result, students will be less likely to retain the specific learning objectives of the lesson.

2. Maintaining the same topic and objective for consecutive activities.

Learning is more effective when different activities within a lesson maintain the same topic and learning objective, as opposed to a lesson being a series of unrelated activities with changing topics and objectives. When activities share the same topic and learning objective, students will reinforce their learning through repetition and continued association with a familiar topic. For example, if the topic is "celebrations," and the objective is to understand speech that is spoken at a certain rate, teachers can maintain the same topic and objective throughout several activities in one lesson. The following example includes a warm-up activity, a listening comprehension activity, controlled practice, and an open-ended listening/speaking activity.

1. Start with a warm-up question to the class, such as: "What's your favorite celebration?" or "What's the favorite celebration in this class?"

2. Then, introduce a listening comprehension activity in which two people have a conversation about their favorite celebration, and have students answer “True or false” questions based on the conversation.

3. Next, conduct a controlled practice activity, which could be a drill activity that models vocabulary or an important grammatical structure.

4. Finally, introduce an open-ended activity that allows students the freedom to practice listening comprehension and speaking, such as interviewing other members in the class about their favorite celebration and asking for further information.

In the above example, each activity builds on the preceding one using the same objective throughout. The idea is that communication and listening comprehension should expand the students' knowledge by maintaining a topic, throughout consecutive activities and reinforcing the same learning objective.

3. Applying appropriate teaching methods and techniques

When designing listening comprehension lessons, teachers should apply the following methods and techniques to make the lessons challenging, effective and interesting to the students.

Use a variety of activities

If a teacher always uses the same activities, they will become boring for students. It is important to vary activities to stimulate the students' interest and challenge them with something new. It is also important to consider activities that involve group work and problem solving and that instigate communication and listening comprehension development.

A variation of the simple “Fill in the missing word” listening activity is to use the same listening materials but to combine pair work with an information-gap activity. For example, give student A and student B worksheets containing the lyrics to the same song, but make sure that each student has different pieces of missing information. Without showing their worksheets to each other, the two students take turns asking questions about the missing information, and the answers supplied by their partner will complete the lyrics to the song. Using this technique, students have to practice effective communication by accurately forming the correct question necessary to elicit the missing words from their partners. Finally, students can check their answers by listening to the song.

Another example for a lengthy listening activity is to assign students through different comprehension questions about a listening text that tells a story or gives a report. Together, he answers to the questions and explain the story or report. After listening to recording and taking notes, students ask each other questions about what each class member hear until they get enough information to complete the big picture. The teacher can play the recording as many times as is needed, depending on the level of difficulty and the ability of the students.

This way, the students try to find answers to the questions independently, rather than knowing that the teacher will give the answers straight away.

4. Selecting materials for listening comprehension activities

When selecting materials, the following criteria can be used to make listening comprehension activities both productive and engaging:

- make material relevant to students
- focus on the clear design and layout of materials
- emphasize prediction in listening comprehension materials
- select materials appropriate for students' level

5. Using authentic materials

The use of authentic texts helps students to further develop their communicative skills (Porter and Roberts 1987; Brown 2001; Mangubhai 2002). When designing listening comprehension materials, the teacher should be aware that authentic materials give the learner the chance to develop skills that are needed in real-life situations.

With the use of authentic listening materials, students learn to comprehend challenging language elements such as a natural rate of delivery and intonation, false starts, slang, reduced forms, abbreviations, and other characteristics of spoken language. This exposure helps students comprehend real-life, everyday languages, make allowances for performance errors by other speakers, deal with interruption, and so on.

To sum up, listening is one of the most important skills as people learn a language first by listening to it. Although many listening skills in your native language can be transferred to listening in a foreign language, many learners find it difficult to acquire this skill. The main thing in developing your listening skills is obvious - practice listening more! So you can practice your listening not only in the classroom, but also while walking in the street (with a walkman), driving a car (radio' or tapes), at home!

The following tips might help you to develop your listening comprehension skills:

- Before listening look at the task and carefully read the instructions. Make sure that you understand what is required from you. This will help you concentrate while listening to the recording.
- Looking at the topic or the given tasks try to predict the content of what you are going to listen to. Then after listening you will be able to check if your guesses were correct or not.
- Listen to songs in English as often as possible, because the lyrics are repeated and will eventually become easier. After listening you can check the lyrics of the songs. From these websites you can download lyrics for most of the popular songs.

- Reflect on your progress. You can keep a diary where every day or week you will be writing about what you have listened to, whether it is difficult or not, what helps you to understand the recording, what strategies you have used and so on.

Remember! Practice makes perfect!

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