

**TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM**

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*The article is devoted to the problem of teaching listening skills. The main stages of listening are described; the factors that cause problems while listening are analyzed; the difference between the two main listening strategies is described.*

Listening is the most significant part of communication as it is pivotal in providing a substantial and meaningful response. Listening plays a vital role especially in learning a language for communicative purpose, as it helps the language learner to acquire pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary, and syntax. Comprehension of messages conveyed can be based solely on tone of the voice, pitch and accent; and it is only possible when we listen. Without appropriate understanding of the input, learning simply cannot get any improvement [3].

Besides, listening is a complex process due to its double psychological and social nature: on the one hand, it is a psychological phenomenon, which takes place on a cognitive level inside people's heads; on the other hand, it is a social phenomenon, which develops interactively between people and the environment surrounding them. Being a complex process, listening needs to be understood in order to be taught, and subsequently, evaluated before integrating with phonological aspects and with the skill of speaking.

A number of studies, 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 [3]. With the highest percentage of involvement in the exchange of information in effective communication, listening has to be considered a language forerunner. Unlike the other language skills, it is felt comparatively more difficult by the learners, having a set of interrelated subskills such as receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. However, with the advent of communicative language teaching and the focus on proficiency, the learning and teaching of listening started to receive more attention, though certain problems still remain.

According to Nunan, listening is a six-staged process, consisting of hearing, attending, understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding. These stages occur in sequence and rapid succession. The first one is *hearing* and has to do with the response caused by sound waves stimulating the sensory receptors of the ear. Hearing is the perception of sound, not necessarily paying attention, you must hear to listen, but you need not listen to hear.

The second stage is *attending*. It refers to a selection that our brain focuses on. The brain screens stimuli and permits only to select a few to come into focus.

The third stage is *understanding*, which consists of analyzing the meaning of what we have heard and understanding symbols we have seen and heard. We must analyze the stimuli we have perceived. Symbolic stimuli are not only words, they can be sounds like applause or even sights, like a blue uniform that have symbolic meanings as well. To do this, we have to stay in the right context and understand the intended meaning. The meaning attached to these symbols is a function of our past associations and of the context in which the symbols occur for successful interpersonal communication: the listener must understand the intended meaning and the context assumed by the sender. Listeners have to take into account several points: general factual information, local factual information, socio-cultural knowledge and knowledge of context. With these factors, the information will be correctly received and understood.

The following stage is *remembering*. It is an important listening process because it means that an individual, in addition to receiving and interpreting the message, has added it to the mind's storage bank, which signifies that the information will be remembered in our mind. Our attention is selective as well as our memory, what is remembered may be quite different from what was originally heard or seen.

In the penultimate stage, *evaluating*, the listener estimates the message that has been received. It is at this point when active listeners weigh evidence, sort fact from opinion and determine the presence or absence of bias or prejudice in a message. The effective listener makes sure that he or she does not begin this activity too soon, as beginning this stage before a message is completed results in no longer hearing and attending to the incoming message and, as a result, the listening process ceases.

The last stage is *responding*. According to the response, the speaker checks if the message has been received correctly. This stage requires that the receiver completes the process through verbal or nonverbal feedback, because the speaker has no other way to determine if a message has been received. Therefore, it is sometimes complicated, as we do not have the opportunity to go back and check comprehension [4].

According to Yagang, the problems in listening are accompanied with the four main factors. The first factor is the message itself. Many learners find it more difficult to listen to a taped message than to read the same message on a piece of paper, since the listening passage comes into the ear in the twinkling of an eye, whereas reading material can be read as long as the reader likes. The next factor is the speaker who can be characterized by his or her own pace, volume, pitch, and intonation. Natural dialogues are also full of hesitations, pauses, and uneven intonation. The third factor is the listener: foreign-language students are not familiar enough with clichés and collocations in English to predict a missing word or phrase. Lack of sociocultural, factual, and contextual knowledge of the target language can present an obstacle to comprehension because language is used to express its culture. Foreign-language learners usually devote more time to reading than to listening, and so lack exposure to different kinds of listening materials. Both psychological and physical factors may have a negative effect on perception and interpretation of listening material. It is tiring for students to concentrate on interpreting unfamiliar sounds, words, and sentences for long periods. The last factor is the physical setting, noise, including both background noises on the recording and environmental noises, that can take the listener's mind off the content of the listening passage. Unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality equipment can interfere with the listener's comprehension. The problems can be caused by the speech rate, vocabulary and pronunciation as well [6].

Listening activities generally induce the anxiety and stress among the learners as they involve the interpersonal and interpretive modes of communication in which they have 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.

According to Anderson, listening strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the recall of listening input. 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. 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 [1].

The difference between the strategies is the following. For the Top-down process, students take into account the context and do not need to pay attention to specific details while in Bottom up listening process, students have to pay attention to specific details, because it is very important to understand the whole meaning of the conversation or another kind of listening activity. The listener focuses on individual words and phrases, and achieves understanding by stringing these detailed elements together to build up a whole. Understanding the exact word is more important. These strategies train the language learner to cope with the demands of listening.

With the development of computer science and Internet technology, video resources are more often used in classrooms, especially in listening classrooms. The benefits of using videos in listening seems obvious: it arouses students' interest in learning and makes teaching more effective; and by watching videos, the learners could catch some non-verbal components of spoken text, such as gestures, facial expression, thus get a more authentic input than only listening to the audio can provide. But the effect of video on listening comprehension has not been fully studied.

We conveyed a survey about students' attitude towards the use of video materials in class. The survey questionnaire, consisting of 14 statements, was distributed to 20 students. Participants were asked to agree or disagree with the proposed statements. Then the answers were processed with the help of the quantitative method and the results were interpreted. According to the survey, the most important results are the following. 85% of the students prefer to use English video materials rather than use those materials provided in the textbook. 90% of the students said that video materials motivate them to do more listening outside the classroom. All the participants stated that video materials help them improve their language proficiency. The overwhelming majority, 90% of the students, claimed that video materials help them to understand other listening materials outside the class. 85% of the students stated that they would use video materials in order to improve their understanding. The analysis of the students' responses from the questionnaire revealed that they were more interested in learning English if the teacher used English videos as teaching materials. In addition, the keyword preview before watching videos motivated them to learn English. They explained that it was easier for them to remember and understand vocabulary in the video which they had been previously taught during the pre-listening stage. Overall, students agreed that videos were beneficial in learning English, and that English subtitles in video movies were an excellent aid to learning English.

Drawing a conclusion, it is necessary to say that language learning is impossible without listening skills. This happens because there is no communication where there is no human interaction. Listening is crucial not only in language learning but also for learning other subjects. However, even today, with all the technological

advancements in the field of education, learners have problems with listening because of a number of reasons. They spend too little time to improve their listening skills; inappropriate strategies tested on them in a learning setting may be an extra reason for their poor listening comprehension. The problems are also caused by the message, the speaker, the listener and the physical settings. To acquire high-level listening skills, more exposure should be given to the learners with a variety of listening comprehension. Knowing the context and the purpose for listening can greatly reduce the burden of comprehension. Listeners can use both Bottom-up strategies and Top-down strategies to comprehend. Some suggestions to overcome the problems students encounter in the process of listening and to upgrade their listening skills is to use video materials in a language learning classroom.

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