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## Improving listening and speaking skills in mixed level groups (on the material of *New English File*)

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### Abstract

The purpose of our study is to investigate works of scholars about the problems of listening and speaking in learning foreign languages. We try to analyze the difficulties in doing listening and speaking exercises in mixed level groups focusing on “New English File” (Intermediate) textbook. “New English File” presents different kinds of listening and speaking tasks in order to improve all four skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing). In our study we refer to Wenden’s statement (1986), who noted that we need to find out listening problems in order to improve listening skill. According to it, we discovered difficulties not only in listening, but also in speaking of students in mixed level groups. These difficulties helped us to find the ways of improving students’ abilities to listen to authentic materials and apply them in communication. Problems in listening and speaking in mixed level groups were taken from the results of questionnaire. Students’ questionnaire determined the effective ways of using role plays and various activities in practice. The result of our study showed that the textbook was worse using in mixed level groups. Different creative activities in English classes motivate students to learn foreign languages, and improve knowledge.

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*Keywords:* speaking, listening, activities, role play, mixed level groups, New English File

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### 1. Introduction

The choice of Astana as the site for the International exhibition “Expo-2017”: “Energy Future” opens up opportunities to improve speaking and listening skills in English. As highlighted by Nursultan Nazarbayev, the

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President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “English is desirable in modern life and it is necessary tomorrow.” (Nazarbayev, 2006) Hence, speaking and listening skills in English play a vital role for nowadays Kazakhstani students. For this, we have searched some ways of improving speaking and listening skills in mixed level groups in this study. All of our students have different language proficiency levels, because most of them are trained under the weak influence of English grammar at secondary schools. Some students cannot learn English individually, and others just are in the habit of doing textbook exercises and read given materials. Ultimately, in higher schools, they have difficulties in speaking and listening. They have difficulties in pronouncing words, understanding the meaning of the words, phrases, using the linking words, grammatical structure, expressing their ideas, thoughts, sharing their opinions in English, and analyzing the problems. In fact, speaking and listening are closely integrated skills in learning any foreign languages.

According to the requirements of our life, English listening and speaking have important utility values in all spheres. Speaking and listening tend to be more important in human communication and daily life. As a fact, any language develops from listening and speaking.

According to the state program of education development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011–2020, adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science, one of the key tasks is to increase population speaking English to 10 % by 2014, to 15 % by 2017, to 20 % by 2020 and increase population speaking three languages (Kazakh, Russian and English) to 10 % by 2014, to 12 % by 2017, to 15 % by 2020 (State program of education development in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011).

Considering self-practices in teaching English in mixed level groups, we determined some difficulties in listening and speaking skills. According to scholars, as Yagang (1994), Higgins (1995), Flowerdew and Miller (1996), the main problems in listening are pronunciation, the speed of delivery, new vocabulary or terminology, and concept. We agree that students face these problems not only in listening, but also in speaking skills. During listening and speaking, there is a difference between a native speaker and non-native speaker, where the speed of speech varies. Students can meet with difficulties in determining the meanings of words, idioms, and phrases of colloquial languages, and pronunciation. In our study, we try to find the solutions to solve these problems.

The aim of our study is to improve English listening and speaking skills of students in mixed level groups. In order to reach this aim, we put several objectives:

1. To conduct listening and speaking questionnaire (LSQ) about students’ attitude toward speaking and listening skills;
2. To identify learning efficient activities in developing listening and speaking skills on “New English File” edition;
3. To find solutions to reduce difficulties and improve listening and speaking skills of students in mixed level groups.

## **2. Literature review**

Different scholars have different concepts of listening and speaking but they all agree with one very important feature of listening and speaking, that is a two way process between the speaker and listener.

Listening plays an important role in second language instruction for several reasons (Rost, 1994). If you cannot hear it well, you will find it hard to communicate or perhaps you cannot do listening task for instance. In fact, students often take the wrong way when listening and this leads them to the poor result. It should be noted that the learner’s perception of their listening problem and strategies can affect their comprehension both positively and negatively (Wenden, 1986). Thus, in order to help students get improved with their listening skill, it is needed finding out their listening problems which cause difficulties to them. We strongly agree with this statement that to improve listening skills it is important to find out the listening problems regardless of the level of students English knowledge. Each student has his/her own problems and the task of the teacher is to help him/her cope with these problems.

According to Yagang (1994), the problems in listening were accompanied with the four following factors: the message, the speaker, the listener and the physical setting. Furthermore, numbers of research have been carried out

to pick out the problem in listening. The problems were believed to cause by the speech rate, vocabulary and pronunciation (Higgins, 1995).

As Flowerdew & Miller (1996) assumed that the problems of the students were for the speed of delivery, new terminology and concept, difficulty in focusing and the physical environment.

According to Howatt and Dakin (1974) listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding of a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously. We think that strong students in our groups can also do these things simultaneously and show their good progress.

Tam (1997) says that it is necessary to give students a variety of situations and frequent speaking tasks which play a significant role in the improvement of students' fluency while speaking. When we give the students speaking tasks to do them in the form of the role-plays, creating real situations, we see that each student tries to speak freely and feel confident in communicating English. We think that using speaking tasks in all our classes help students to improve their speaking skills.

According to Rost (1991) "Listening is an active process requiring participation on the part of the listener". For example when someone listens to a speaker, he/she processes the information mentally in order to construct an answer. During the listening process the listener is actively engaged. In learning a foreign language, it is important to listen to what is transmitted with a great deal of attention because this helps the listener to reproduce exactly, or almost exactly, what he/she hears. Therefore listening is not an isolated skill; we listen in order to understand what has been heard. Moreover the speaker and the listener must be interacting in a social context. If a student understands the speech of a speaker, it gives him/her an opportunity to be involved in the process of communication.

According to Larsen- Freeman (1986) "It is through interaction between speaker and listener the meaning becomes clear". This clarity suggests an understanding of what has been heard.

According to Dong Xiaohong (1994) speaking is "one of the most necessary language proficiency". Speaking, thus, seems to be the most important skill that should be paid attention to in the process of teaching and learning. Likewise, today's world requires that the goal of teaching speaking should improve students' communicative skills, because, only in that way, students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and culture rules.

Scott (1978) reveals that "speaking can be typified as an activity involving two or more people in whom the participants are both hearers and speakers having to react to what they hear and make their contribution." Each has an intention or a set of intentions that he wants to achieve in the interaction and an ability to interpret what is said to him whom he cannot predict exactly either in terms of form or in terms of meaning.

Brown (1983) also states that "speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information." Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. It is often spontaneous, open ended and evolving. However, speech is not always unpredictable. Language functions that tend to recur in certain discourse situations (declining and invitation, requesting time off from work) can be identified and charted. Speaking requires not only that learners know how to produce specific points of language, such as grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary (linguistic competence), but also that they understand when, why and in what way to produce language (sociolinguistic competence).

This analysis of researching has found that improvement in listening skill has a positive effect on speaking. Speaking and listening are intimately interrelated activities in the learning process. Particularly, there is a significant relationship between listening and speaking. Much debate continued to prove the increasing influence of listening skill on speaking. We corroborate Rost (1994) proposed three reasons to improve listening and speaking skills. First, speaking provides a means of interaction for the learner, because learners must interact to achieve understanding, access to speakers of the language is essential. Second, authentic spoken language presents a challenge for the learner to attempt to understand the language as native speakers actually use it. Third, listening exercises provide teachers with the means for drawing learners' attention to new forms (vocabulary, grammar, new interaction patterns) in the language.

### 3. Methods

In order to achieve our aim to improve listening and speaking skills in mixed level groups, our study was based on the collection and search of the theoretical and practical materials. Theoretical materials include literature sources and review. Practical materials involve: to conduct a questionnaire (LSQ) about students' attitude toward speaking and listening skills in mixed level groups; to identify learning efficient activities in developing listening and speaking skills; and to find solutions in improving listening and speaking skills of students in mixed level groups.

The subjects of the study are 20 first-year students from different groups, they were randomly chosen. They range from 16-18 years of age. Of the 20 students, 8 students finished schools in villages. The duration of English classes at school was different. Some have learnt English for 4 years; some of them have learnt English for 3 years. The reason of choosing the first-year students for our study is our academic curriculum, and a textbook "New English File". This book fully provides with listening and speaking activities. Curriculum on "New English File" is the same for all groups. We made some changes in curriculum for our research, and try to adapt listening and speaking materials to mixed level groups.

We use LSQ in our study, because it helped us to create a group for our researching, and it is one of the easiest ways to compile data in short period of time. The aim of LSQ was to elicit students' background of English, students' attitude to listening and speaking skills, students' difficulties in listening and speaking. Data from the questionnaire were sorted and analyzed statistically and displayed in diagrams.

This questionnaire helped us to find fruitful learning activities in developing listening and speaking skills in mixed level groups, and to find solutions to reduce difficulties in listening and speaking skills.

### 4. Results

In our research we prepared a questionnaire for students of mixed level groups. Each question has four options. The analysis and interpretation of questionnaire is shown in figures 1-5:

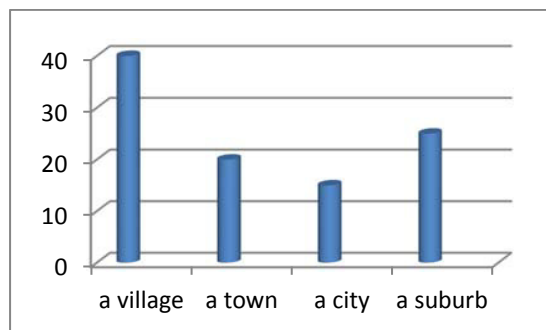


Fig.1. The analysis for the first question (What area did you arrive?)

8 (40%) of students arrived from villages, 4 (20%) – from towns, 3 (15%) – from cities, and 5 (25%) – from suburbs.

This question is aimed to identify what places students lived and finished schools before entering the university. It is one of the reasons of having different level of language proficiency in our groups. There are many students from villages and suburbs, than students from towns and cities.

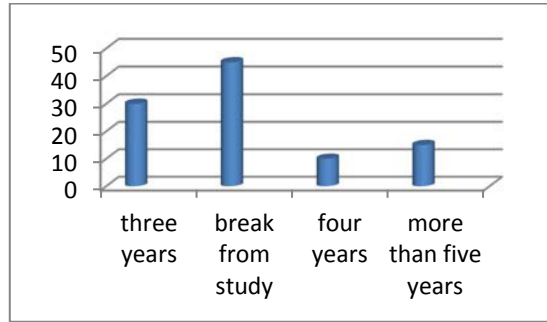


Fig. 2. The analysis for the second question (How long have you been learning English?)

6 (30%) of students have learned English for 3 years, while 9 (45%) students have had break from study. The students learning English 4 years constitutes 2 (10%), and only 3 (15%) of students learned English more than 5 years. From this point, we can make a conclusion of having mixed level groups; the reason is in the duration of learning English.

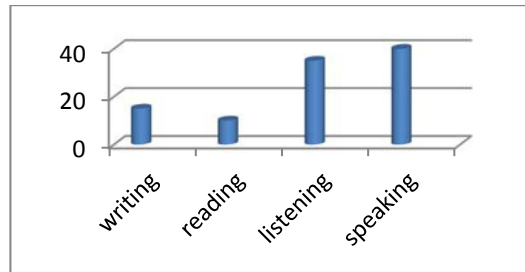


Fig.3. The analysis for the third question (What skills do you like more?)

3 (15%) of students like to write, while 2 (10%) prefer reading. Otherwise, almost 7 (35%) of students prefer listening, and 8 (40%) like speaking skills. These answers of students for the given question shows positive attitude of students to listening and speaking skills. They would like to improve their skills in listening and speaking.

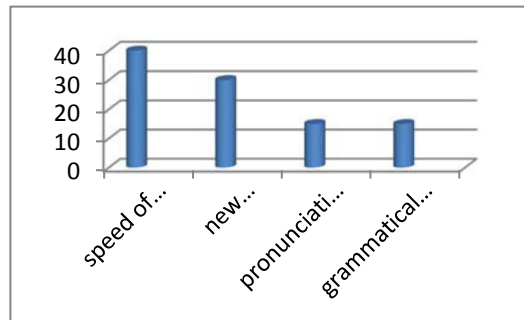


Fig.4. The analysis for the fourth question (What difficulties do you face in listening and speaking?)

8 (40%) of students have difficulties in speed of delivery during listening and speaking, 6 (30%) face problems with misunderstanding of new vocabulary and terminology. 3 (35%) of students think that they have problems in pronunciation of English words, while 3 (15%) of students have difficulties in composing sentences using correct grammatical structure.

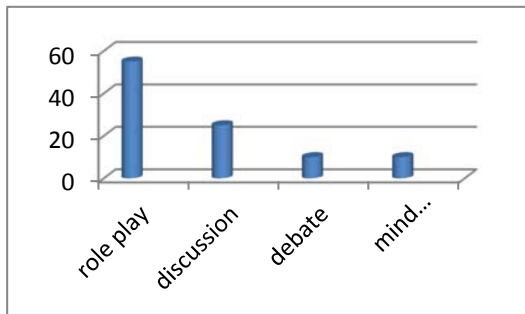


Fig.5. The analysis for the fifth question (What type of activity do you prefer in improving listening and speaking skills?)

## 5. Discussion

As for mixed level group students, role plays help students cope with real life situations, commonly used expressions, forcing them to think “on their feet”. Furthermore, role-plays help students work together as a team or a group, and communicate in order to understand each other. Role play can improve students speaking skills in any situation, and helps to interact. As for the mixed level group students, role play activities help to overcome difficulties in speaking. In addition, it is fun and most students think that enjoyment leads to better learning.

Students with low English proficiency in mixed level groups push teachers to determine the useful and fruitful activities in improving listening and speaking skills. The first-year students study English on “New English File” textbook. During our experiment in mixed level groups, we used relevant role-play activities for our students, as Beautiful Mind, Bingo, Fishbowl, Interview, Leader of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century, Mind Mapping, Star Wars, Who Wins a Million? etc.

As an example, we present one of the role plays “Beautiful Mind”. The goal is to consolidate the learning material and practice listening and speaking skills. 20 questions of the previous topics are prepared beforehand by teachers. The tasks of the students are to listen to the questions from audio/video resources and to choose the correct answer. During this role play, students discuss the questions in the groups. In the case of any difficulties with answering the questions, they use prompts. At the end of this role play, we assess the students’ listening abilities and abilities to express their minds.

As it was mentioned before, students in mixed level groups have difficulties in speed of delivery during listening and speaking, face problems with misunderstanding of new words and phrases, have problems in pronunciation of English words, and have difficulties in composing sentences using correct grammatical structure. In order to find solutions to reduce these difficulties, we start to listen to short dialogues from “New English File” textbook. There are a lot of dialogues in “New English File” for doing listening tasks. Having in mind the difficulties of our students in listening, we start to listen to these dialogues by making pauses. After listening to short dialogues, students do exercises for comprehension. These exercises include: to find the main heroes; to copy out numbers or figures; to highlight proper names; to mark signal words of grammar (usually, always, sometimes, every day). The content of the listened part of the dialogue students tell his/her partner. For each part of the dialogue, we offer the following tasks:

1. Write down familiar words which you hear during the listening;
2. Write down expressions which you remember;
3. Write down numbers from the dialogue;
4. Write down unfamiliar words from the dialogue;
5. Identify the heroes of the dialogue (a man or a woman, etc.);
6. Write down interrogative sentences.
7. Repeat the first or the last sentence;
8. Repeat words or phrases after the speaker;
9. Identify the kind of sentences (positive, negative or exclamation etc.);
10. Improvise the dialogue.

These tasks helped students to be familiar with English speech and to habit to the speed of speech, to pronounce English words correctly, to learn new words and terminology, to know English grammar structure.

Each unit of the “New English File” textbook contains a lot of listening and speaking tasks. As an example of improving listening and speaking skills in mixed level groups, we took one of our practical lessons. We enclosed the students’ work (answers).

For instance: on the topic ‘Food: fuel or pleasure?’ Students listen to the dialogue between an interviewer and Kevin Poulter (he is an English chef, who has opened a restaurant in Santiago, the capital Chile). Students did the listening tasks according to our suggested points:

**1) Write down familiar words which you hear during the listening:** a restaurant, a tourist, a place, to open, new, ideas, name, food, steak, traditional, typical, fruit, cream, English tea, afternoon, cakes, tooth, people, money, today, women, kitchen, a job, atmosphere, cheese, thank you.

Students wrote down the words which they knew. They were words, which we hear in our real life (conversation, media, TV, cartoons etc.)

**2) Write down expressions which you remember:** I’d always wanted, it would be a good place, proper English tea, in fact, the most important reason, don’t like shouting at.

Students wrote down very useful expressions which they can use in all situations of life.

**3) Write down numbers from the dialogue:** second

There is a chance to explain to students types of numerals (cardinal or ordinal).

**4) Write down unfamiliar words from the dialogue:** pro-European, risotto, trifle, referee, gastropubs, incredibly, Stilton, Roquefort.

This task helped students to expand vocabulary and increase knowledge in learning culture of the language.

**5) Identify the heroes of the dialogue (a man or a woman, etc.):** interviewer (a woman), Kevin (a man).

This task helped students to play the roles of two heroes and practice a speaking skill.

**6) Write down interrogative sentences:**

- a) Why did you decide to open a restaurant in Chile?
- b) Why did you call the restaurant Frederick’s?
- c) What kind of food do you serve?
- d) Is your chef English?
- e) What kind of dishes do you have on the menu?
- f) Why do men mainly work in the restaurant kitchen than women?
- g) Do you really miss English food?

Students were taught to construct interrogative sentences and ask questions during the conversation.

**7) Repeat the first or the last sentence:** *the first sentence:* Why did you decide to open a restaurant in Chile?  
*The last sentence:* Kelvin, thank you very much.

This task helped students to have information about the beginning of the conversation and the end of the dialogue.

**8) Repeat the words or phrases after the speaker:** restaurant, tourist, pasta, chef, menu, dessert, atmosphere, reason, and sweet tooth.

This kind of task helped students to pronounce the words and expressions correctly on the given topic.

**9) Identify the kind of the sentences** (positive, negative or exclamation, etc.):

**Positive:** I always wanted to have my own restaurant in England.

I wanted to visit Chile as a tourist.

Frederick is my father's name.

International dishes are steak, pasta, risotto.

People think that the English are not good cooks.

In the morning we serve traditional English breakfast.

For lunch we have a lot of English desserts, for example trifle.

We drink tea with cakes and sandwiches.

The best place for a tourist in England is a pub.

Food is not expensive in the pub.

Many men work in the restaurant than women.

The thing which I miss in Chile is English cheese.

I really miss Silton.

Roquefort is the French cheese.

**Negative:** No, He is a Chilean.

Many women don't want to have a job in the restaurant, because they don't want to be there until late at night.

They don't like the atmosphere where there is a lot of shouting.

**Exclamation:** You should try it!

This task helped students to revise English grammar tenses and remember the formation of tenses and the actions in sentences.

**10) Improve a dialogue in the form of the role play.**

Having done all of these tasks in practice, we came to the conclusion that they all have positive effect on improving listening and speaking abilities of the students. These tasks help students to remember the theme, to enrich vocabulary, to construct English sentences, to learn expressions, to pronounce words correctly.

## 6. Conclusion

This study aims at investigating listening and speaking skills in mixed level groups. What kind of activities can teachers use in English classes to improve listening and speaking skills? What difficulties do students have in listening and speaking in mixed level groups?

Based on questionnaire (LSQ), this study has identified learning efficient activities in developing listening and speaking skills on "New English File" edition; and found solutions to improve listening and speaking skills of students in mixed level groups.. The solutions were concentrated on determining listening and speaking tasks and activities for students in mixed level groups.

In summary, this study is believed to be useful for working in heterogeneous groups. It is hoped that the teachers of English can benefit from this study new ideas and fruitful suggestions to improve listening and speaking skills. Further studies will be carried out in order to get more convincing results.

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