

Language Lab activities to enhance Listening Skills

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Abstract

Listening is a critical element in the competent language performance of adult second language learners, whether they are communicating at school, college, at work, or in a community. Through the normal course of a day, listening is used nearly twice as much as speaking and four to five times as much as reading and writing (Rivers, 1981). Study has found that listening was perceived to be crucial for communication at work with regards to entry level employment, job success, general competence, managerial competency, and effectiveness of relationships between superiors and subordinates. Therefore it is clear that acquiring listening skills is of utmost importance to be successful academically and professionally.

My paper is an attempt at highlighting not only the importance of listening skills for technical students but on how to acquire and improve them through various activities.

(Key Words - Listening, Processing sounds, Perception skills, Analytical skills, Synthesis skills)

Introduction

As the decline of Grammar-Translation method in 1960s proved that language learning might not be limited to “reading and writing” or ‘literacy’, the provisional continuation of Direct Method confirmed too that ‘listening and speaking’ that is ‘oracy’ is not all that is language. Language must be taught in an integrative way where all four skills are focused.

But most often, even in the modern methods of SL teaching, quite surprisingly, listening skill is ignored in one way or another! Besides, in our schools, colleges and even in the higher levels, instructors direct how to read and write, not how to speak or listen. It is believed that these would be mastered by the learners automatically. Although listening had a boost up in 1960s (direct method) and in 1980s (Krashen’s input hypothesis, 1981; James Asher’s Total physical response, 1988 and Gillian Brown, 1988), it turned a fashion in most cases!

What is listening?

Listening is a skill, in a sense that it’s a related but a distinct process than hearing which involves merely perceiving sound in a passive way. Listening occupies an active and immediate analysis of the streams of sounds.

What ‘listening’ really means is ‘listening and understanding what we hear at the same time’. So, two concurrent actions are demanded to take place in this process. Besides, according to Michael Rost (1991), listening comprises of some component skills which are:

- discriminating between sounds
- recognizing words
- identifying grammatical groupings of words
- identifying expressions and sets of utterances that act to create meaning
- connecting linguistic cues to non-linguistic and paralinguistic cues
- using background knowledge to predict and later to confirm meaning and recalling important words .

As McDonough and Shaw (1993) and Rost (1991) explain that a listener as a processor of language has to go through three processes using three types of skills:

a. Processing sound/ Perception skills:

As the complete perception doesn't emerge from only the source of sound, listeners segment the stream of sound and detect word boundaries, contracted forms, vocabulary, sentence and clause boundaries, stress on longer words and effect on the rest of the words, the significance of intonation and other language-related features, changes in pitch, tone and speed of delivery, word order pattern, grammatical word classes, key words, basic syntactic patterns, cohesive devices etc.

b. Processing meaning/ Analysis skills:

It's a very important stage in the sense, as researches show, that syntax is lost to memory within a very short time whereas meaning is retained for much longer. Richards (1985:191) says that, 'memory works with propositions, not with sentences'. While listening, listeners categorize the received speech into meaningful sections, identify redundant material, keep hold of chunks of the sentences, think ahead and use language data to anticipate what a speaker may be going to say, accumulate information in the memory by organizing them and avoid too much immediate detail.

c. Processing knowledge and context/ Synthesis skills:

Here, 'context' refers to physical setting, the number of listener and speakers, their roles and their relationship to each other while 'linguistic knowledge' refers to their knowledge of the target language brought to the listening experience. Every context has its individual frame of reference, social attitude and topics. So, members of a particular culture have particular rules of spoken behavior and particular topic which instigate particular understanding. Listening is thought as 'interplay' between language and brain which requires the "activation of contextual information and previous knowledge" where listeners guess, organize and confirm meaning from the context.

Listening is a demanding process, not only because of the complexity of the process itself, but also due to factors that characterize the listener, the speaker, the content of the message, and any visual support that accompanies the message(Brown & Yule, 1983).

Students need to apply both their knowledge and the appropriate use of the language to communicate with other people. If the students do not learn to listen effectively, they will be unable to take part in oral communication. Merely to hear what a speaker says is insufficient for

communication to occur. When nobody listens to a speaker or when a listener fails to understand the message, we say communication has broken down. This does not mean that the message has not been heard – i.e. that the sounds have not been received. It means that the listener has either not been paying attention or trying to grasp the message has not managed to understand it.

By ‘learning to listen’ then, means that the students are expected to attend to what they hear, to process it, to understand it, to interpret it, to evaluate it, to respond to it. We want the students to become involved and active listeners.

Why listening?

No doubt, listening is the most common communicative activity in daily life. according to Morley (1991, p.82), “We can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write.”

It is widely known that individual’s ability to process and analyze the sounds influence their ability to translate the sounds of language into their written form. We know, reading is not only a visual process rather involves the rapid analysis of letters and words that represents sounds and it is sound which gives the words meaning. A learner can decode the graphic images or recognize their meaning efficiently if their auditory processing skills are well developed. In a similar way, sounds are translated into graphic form in writing and if the sounds are poorly integrated their graphic representation will be hampered and problems like spelling mistakes may arise. So, we see the foundation on which reading and writing skills are built is spoken language again listening is the fundamental to spoken language as without listening anything we can’t reproduce or reply.

Stages of Teaching Listening

There are three stages of teaching listening:

Pre-listening:

It is unfair to plunge students into the listening text as this makes it extremely difficult for them to use the natural listening skills of matching what they hear with what they expect to hear and using their previous knowledge to make sense of it.

So before listening, students should be ‘tuned in’ so that they know what to expect both in general and for particular tasks. This preparatory work is described as pre-listening.

While-listening:

While listening activities are what the students are asked to do during the time that they are listening to a text. As far as listening comprehension is concerned, the purpose of the while-listening activity is

- To help learners develop the skill of eliciting messages from the spoken language. The other reasons why students need to listen to the language they are studying are to understand how the words sound, the pronunciation, the stress, the rhythm and the intonation. They can use what they hear as a model for their own speech.

- Good while-listening activities will help learners find their way through the text and help them in learning the language too.

Post listening:

Embraces all the work related to a particular listening text (whether recorded or spoken by the teacher) which is done after the listening is completed. The purpose of post-listening is:

- To check whether the students have understood what they needed to understand and whether they have completed whatever while-listening task has been set, successfully.
- To reflect on why some students have failed to understand or missed parts of the message. The teacher draws attention to specific parts of the listening text and focuses on forms, functions, lexis, stress, and intonation which have caused problems for the listeners.
- To give students the opportunity to consider the attitude and manner of the speakers of the listening text.
- To expand on the topic or language of the listening text and perhaps transfer things learned to another context.

Activities conducted in the language labs to improve listening skills

- **Marking items in a picture** - Having carried out some pre-listening work using a picture, students are asked to respond to various stimuli by marking things on the picture like – identifying people and things, marking items mentioned by the teacher, marking errors, checking details and marking choices etc.
- **Information gap activities** – Students are given comic strips with dialogue boxes. Students listen to the teacher and fill in the boxes with appropriate dialogues
- **Situational dialogues** – With a pre-listening activity as to what or where the situation is (information counters, at the doctors, academic counseling etc), the students listen to conversations and fill in with appropriate dialogues, figures and facts.
- **Group Discussion video** – The faculty talks about the characteristics of a group and discussion and shows a video on it. The students actively listen and answer questions on it later. The teacher discusses the answers with the students and furthers clarifies doubts.
- **Text completion** - This is an information transfer exercise. We give the students plenty of time to go through the text. Because some weak learners tend to get left behind, there are only a few gaps for completion. Newspaper articles and short excerpts of a story are taken as these work well with students.
- **Listening comprehension** – Tests from TOEFL and IELTS are taken. Students are given the questions to go through first and then the recording is played with intermittent gaps. The students answer the questions and then the teacher discusses the answers. We also try to find out where the students may have gone wrong and why as these lessons are sometimes difficult to follow because of the accent.
- **Film Review** – Students are shown movies like ‘Gandhi’, ‘Men of Honor’, ‘Pursuit of Happiness’. As pre-listening we give an introduction to the movie with brief character sketches so that it would facilitate better understanding. The students are given the

questions ahead to help in while listening. They then not only write a review but answer specific questions.

- **Audio recording on Rain Water Harvesting** - Students are asked multiple choice questions after listening to the text. Students read through the questions before they listen, as it would be extremely difficult to read and listen at the same time.

Observations

- Students claim that listening practice has raised their confidence by throwing away their fear, hesitations, inertia and shyness that they had before to speak in English.
- Students have told that watching video clippings and movie while listening enables to identify the right responses, styles, expressions, behaviors, attitudes and emotions in particular situations through concentrating on gesture, body language, non- linguistic cues, planning utterances, adjacency pairs, turn-taking, repairing utterances by asking for repetition, pre-closing and closing.
- Students have said that it has quickened their planning to respond as they listen to faster speaking than their own.
- Students opine that exposure to naturally spoken input by native speakers gives them practical experience of using language in target situations. 20 students who are highly motivated have found a change in their speaking style.
- Students think that listening to dialogues and conversation enriches their vocabulary and teaches how to use them appropriately.
- Students have found that intensive listening practice helps to remember the syntactic structures, spelling, accent and intonation.
- Students mention about learning of the cultures, feelings, reactions, trend and customs of the English speaking people that helps them feel motivated (integrative) to speak English.
- Students opine that watching movie or video clippings draws more attention during the class and add to their learning.
- Students believe that interaction with teachers for assessment or other purposes while listening help them greatly to remove confusion and use their newly gained knowledge immediately.

Conclusion

Listening as a skill must be given its due importance in language acquisition. It cannot be denied that this skill determines the students' success be it academically, personally and professionally at a workplace. Definitely we have to admit that language learning depends on listening as we respond only after listening to something. Listening provides the aural input that serves as the stimuli for language acquisition and make the learners interact in spoken communication. So, effective and ideal language instructors should help the learners to be introduced with native speaking, to be respondent to that both cognitively and orally. In order to do so, first, they should show the students how they can adjust their listening behavior to deal with variety of situations, types of input, and listening purposes. Through this, the skill can be gradually acquired, improved and perfected over a period of time.

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