

Teaching Listening as a Skill

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Abstract

Listening has been identified as one of the most used and one of the most important communication skills in personal, academic, and professional settings alike (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996, pp. 13–25).

The intent of this paper is to discuss the concept of listening and its relevance not only for achieving effective communication, but also as one of the most important coaching skills. The vital role of listening in communication begins with the recognition that listening is the first language skill to be acquired. The foetus listens as it develops in the mother's womb; henceforth, this listening development plays a central role in one's language acquisition. Auditory and visual discrimination also are central to the child's early development of other (including survival, social, and intellectual) skills.

In language teaching listening always gets little or no attention. The poor listening habits or skills cause failures of communication and ineffective expressions of ideas. Real life communication problems actually are caused due to lack of listening training. Training in listening should equip learners to build their ability for effective comprehension.

This paper presents the practical aspects of teaching listening through the theoretical point of view.

KEYWORDS: language teaching, listening skill, intonation, rhythm

Introduction

Listening has been identified as one of the most used and one of the most important communication skills in personal, academic, and professional settings alike (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996, pp. 13–25). The vital role of listening in communication begins with the recognition that listening is the first language skill to be acquired. The foetus listens as it develops in the mother's womb; henceforth, this listening development plays a central role in one's language acquisition. Auditory and visual discrimination also are central to the child's early development of other (including survival, social, and intellectual) skills.

In language teaching listening always gets little or no attention. The poor listening habits or skills cause failures of communication and ineffective expressions of ideas. Real life communication problems actually are caused due to lack of listening training. Training in listening should equip learners to build their ability for effective comprehension.

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Before proceeding further let us know some of the ground realities of teaching listening in our context. They are as follows:

- a. Teaching listening is one of the most neglected aspects of teaching English.
- b. Very often listening is equated to listening to what the teacher speaks.
- c. A large number of learners and teachers as well, are not aware of the role listening has in the acquisition of English.

- d. Repetition is unavoidable in teaching listening. Pronunciation, intonation and rhythm have to be maintained while articulating the items to be repeated. Knowledge of suprasegmental features of several teachers is questionable and they cannot offer their students the best of the models of how to say things.
- e. Many teachers do not have any orientation in the teaching of listening.
- f. Teaching of listening has to be done systematically, with planning and frequently. It is not done so.

Considering these grass root level problems, I have experimented with some of the techniques of teaching listening. They are as follows:

1. One of the techniques is to give them ear training through practice as follows:
The teacher says:
 - a. *I'm going to read out a sentence to you.*
 - b. *It'll be read out three times:*
 - first; very slow*
 - second; a little faster*
 - third; the fastest but with the normal speed, pronunciation and rhythm*
 - c. *Till I finish all the three readings, you'll not write anything. You'll only listen to what's being read out.*
 - d. *After the third reading you'll write down the sentence once.*
 - e. *Pens down please. Are you ready? Here we go.*

The trainer reads out the following sample sentence.

I'd like to express my thanks to my parents for their support.

The trainer does three readings as follows:

First reading:

Each word in the sentence is clearly and distinctly articulated slowly including the weak forms with pauses as indicated below:

I'd/like/ to/ express/ my/ thanks/ to/ my/ parents/ for/ their/ support.

Second reading:

Groups of words are read out clearly with pauses indicated with a little faster speed.

I'd like/ to express/ my thanks/ to my parents/ for their support.

Third reading:

Longer groups of words are read out with normal speed observing the underlined weak forms intonation and rhythm. The speed is normal and natural.

I'd like to express my thanks/ to my parents/ for their support.

After the third reading students write down the sentence and the trainer tells them to read it out.

The researcher's experience with a number of sessions with different groups has been that in the process of listening deletions and additions are quite common.

This depends on the listeners'

- concentration
- perception of what is being said and
- the actual reception

The items that are not perceived properly are very often either substituted or deleted. For example,

I'd is perceived as **I would**

my of **my thanks, their** of **their support** is often deleted

Another experience is: whenever I asked them, *'Which reading of mine were you comfortable with the first, second, or the third?'*

And the answer of a variety of groups I have met so far invariably has been: *'The third one.'*

I would try to find out from them why not the first or second. Many of them would not be able to justify it.

The trainer then explains to them how our brain receives meaningful groups of words (tone group)

They learn that listening should not be done word by word but groups (of words), by groups.

Sustained and controlled practice like this makes students good listeners.

2. Another technique is to explain the importance of listening in learning English. Listening is the only channel that takes spoken English to our brain. If we do not listen to good English we will be deprived of exposure to English and there is no possibility of any English deposited to our brain. Unless English is there in our brain it will not come out of our lips or fingers. This could be demonstrated with examples.

I am with my class. Ovee comes in and says.

'Excuse me, mam, for the interruption but could I speak to you for a while'

I ask my students: *'Could anyone repeat what she said?'*

There is silence. Someone tries to respond but fails.

I tell Ovee to repeat what she said.

'Excuse me, mam, for the interruption but could I speak to you for a while?'

The sentence and the occasion are pre decided. It is to find out whether they have received the sentences with phrases.

Excuse me, mam, / for the interruption/ could I speak to you/ for a while.

Very few of them have received the sentence in bits and pieces.

The utterance is said again highlighting the phrases and with some practice, they are able to repeat.

Features of this technique are:

- a. Learners are caught unawares. The purpose is to find out whether in an educational ambiance our learners listen to what is being spoken around.
- b. This is the occasion to let them know that they need to develop the habit of listening to English whenever there is any opportunity.
- c. This is also to train them to move from the controlled listening to free listening on their own.

3. The next technique is to make them listen to a longer text. It can be done as follows:

A short passage according to the learners' level is identified. Before reading out for recording for listening, pronunciations, weak forms, items highlighted, rhythm, intonations pauses have been marked.

The passage can be read out or played: first a little slow then with the normal speed.

The questions are asked mainly to check whether they have listened to the related language items properly or not. Their comprehension is not tested at this stage.

A sample passage:

A library is a building that contains **stacks of books, CD's, DVD's, newspapers, journals etc.** However, a library is not only a collection of books; it is **a reservoir of knowledge.** Modern libraries have the **internet access and computers.** A librarian is a

person who is in charge of a library. He takes care of **books** and **guides people about new arrivals**. He also helps readers to **search for the books** they are **on the lookout for**. He assists researchers **in accessing the required materials**

(Students are expected to respond strictly with the items they have heard. Answering questions in their own words is not encouraged)

Questions

What kind of building a library is?

Expected listening item (Eli): **a building that contains stacks of books, CD's, DVD's, newspapers, journals etc.**

Apart from the collection of books, what is a library?

Eli: **a reservoir of knowledge**

What do modern libraries have?

Eli: **internet access and computer**

Who is a librarian?

Eli: **a person who is in charge of a library**

What does he take care of?

Eli: **books**

What does he guide people about?

Eli: **new arrivals**

What kind of books does he search for readers?

Eli: **the books they are on the lookout for**

What help does the librarian extend to researchers?

Eli: **in accessing the required material**

A higher level technique is to take students from listening to listening comprehension

Listening is undoubtedly important. Without proper listening, comprehension would be difficult. Listening is receiving what is being heard. Comprehension goes beyond listening. Comprehension involves cognitive processes i.e. the process of knowing, understanding and learning something.

Comprehension, therefore, consist of the following:

- i. Thinking: The moment you listen to something the process of thinking begins
- ii. Putting things together and comparing them
- iii. Connecting
- iv. Sifting which is examining information carefully in order to find something out or to decide what is important and what is not.

All this is bound to get influenced by the learners':

- previous experiences
- socio-cultural background
- world view
- ways of thinking
- attitude to life
- presence of mind
- things coming to their mind at the time of listening
- time, location and learner's state of mind

The trainer's role is to let the student experience that the listening skill is inevitable for comprehension and comprehension involves thinking.

The technique is practiced in the classroom as follows:

A text is read out or played to student. After the first reading questions are put on the board so that during the second reading they get some time to think about the questions and relate them to what they have heard.

This time questions may not be for testing whether the learner has received a specific language item. It is taken for granted that the learner has already received important items from what they have listened to. Now they have to think, understand and learn about what they have heard. Therefore, questions would be different. The purpose would be to develop their comprehension.

While answering the questions, the learner may use the same textual language. They may have to use their own language to express what they want to. On some occasions the answer may lie beyond the text. So the questions asked could be inferential, open-ended, personal response, etc.

Some of the sample questions could be as follows:

What do you think is the passage about?

-library, library and its use

Why is library called 'a reservoir of knowledge?'

-It contains knowledge in the form of print and non-print materials.

In what way is a librarian helpful to readers?

-He/she guides people about new books, helps to search for them and helps accessing material they need.

Depending on the kind of learners teaching listening can begin with listening to:

-sounds (distinguishing between two similar but different sounds

/f,v/, /s,z/, /p,b/ etc)

-sound clusters (/str/, /sm/, /kr/ etc)

-syllables

-words

-phrases

-sentences

From ear training in specific listening, learners can be made to listen to short stretches of language and then can be trained in listening comprehension. The training begins with listening and continues till it reaches comprehension. In the process students are exposed to a lot of good models of English.

The researcher has tried all these techniques of teaching listening at Dept. Of English and he believes if listening is taught in a planned and systematic way with the graded materials it does help learning English.

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