

## **Teaching Listening - An Overview**

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### **Introduction**

Listening is of great importance to both learning in general and second language learning in particular. Listening is important because the ability to understand what others say is essential to communicative interaction. Lee (1986) pointed out that an effective listener is a more effective language learner and user.

Listening is the most frequently used language activity because the average adult spends approximately three times as much time listening as reading (Rankin 1929). Rivers and Temperley (1978) stated that "45 percent of the time adults spend in communication activities is on listening, 30 percent on speaking, 16 percent on reading and 9 percent on writing." Bird (1953) stated that college students spent 42 percent of their time in listening, 25 percent in speaking, 15 percent in reading and 18 percent in writing. Wilt (1950) also pointed out that 57.5 percent of the daily classroom time is spent on listening.

In spite of the importance of listening, this skill is considered one of the most neglected skills. Listening has been often called the "step-child of language learning" (Whiteson 1974). Wilkinson and Atkinson (1965) stated that "oral expression has often been left to the speech and drama teacher; listening comprehension ' has usually been left to nobody at all".

Nichols and Stevens (1957) added that the aural skills of speaking and listening are kept in the background, improving in a "hit and miss fashion if at all". Paulston (1976) stated that:

Comprehending the spoken form of the target language is one of the most difficult tasks for the language learner, yet it is probably the most neglected skill in language teaching.  
(Paulston 1976)

Eastman (1987) described listening as the most difficult of the four skills the beginner of a foreign language has to develop. Belasco (1965) added that listening comprehension has also been called the "most underestimated and least understood aspect of foreign language learning". The commonly held view that listening is a receptive and passive skill is incorrect.

According to Lee (1986), a listener is actively engaged in the process of constructing a message and how accurate his perception or understanding of the message depends on the knowledge of the language as well as knowledge of the world. Listening is not merely receptive because in real life situations, people rarely listen to a spoken text for its own sake. They usually have specific objectives for listening.

## **The Listening Process**

Listening is a complex process in which many things happen simultaneously inside the mind. Besides being complex, listening is far more difficult than many people can imagine.

The listening process basically involves seven steps: the person communicating (i) has his purpose in mind and (ii) produces the oral symbols which will carry his ideas across. The person receiving the communication (iii) hears the oral symbols, (iv) recognizes and interprets them, (v) selects what he wants (vi) to comprehend or to retain so that he can (vii) respond or react (Curriculum Bulletin, University of Northern Iowa 1971).

According to Wheeldon (1981) attentive listening involves the following process:

- i. taking in a stream of more or less continuous sounds
- ii. recognising units within this stream of sound
- iii. recognising meanings which these units are believed to have
- iv. recognising/appreciating the relationships between these units
- v. retaining these semantic units, whilst continuing to "decode" the stream of sound assailing the ears
- vi. modifying on the basis of further decoding the meaning ascribed to previously decoded sound
- vii. perceiving the physical and psychological features in which utterances are made
- viii. judging which features are relevant and which are not
- ix. interpreting the speaker's attitude to what he/she is saying
- x. adopting an attitude to what is being listened to
- xi. judging it and reacting to it
- xii. seeing and interpreting speaker's facial expressions, paralanguage.

Rivers (1971:126-9) stated that speech perception proceeds in three stages all forming a single complex operation:

- i. sensing rapid, roughly defined impressions,
- ii. identification through segmentation and grouping, applying to the collocation rules of the language,
- iii. rehearsal and recording which occur simultaneously with the other two stages; whereby material is recorded for long-term storage.

Rivers (1971) considered the first stage relatively passive; the second and third stages active, thus making listening an active cognitive process.

Listening thus involves two basic levels; recognition and selection. When the learner is first confronted with a foreign language, he/she hears only a barrage of meaningless noise. Gradually after exposure to the language, the learner recognizes the elements and patterns like phonemes,

intonation, words and phrases. When the learner is able to recognize the phonological, syntactic and semantic codes of the language automatically, the learner has reached the level of recognition. Next, the learner sifts out the message bearing units for retention and comprehension without conscious attention to individual components. This is the level of selection.

### **The Characteristics Of Listening**

The characteristics of listening were studied by Wilkinson, Stratta and Dudley (1974); Brubridge (1986); and Nicholas (1988). Brubridge (1986:7) listed six characteristics of listening and their implications for teaching listening.

- i. Spoken language is different from written language. Spoken language is not organized, does not consist of complete sentences and is full of interruptions, hesitations and repetition and does not necessarily contain a lot of information. Hence students should be exposed to authentic speech instead of artificial dialogue or written speech which is read.
- ii. The listener is usually helped by visual information which facilitates understanding. We can see the speaker and his expressions. Therefore, a lot of visuals (slides, maps, photographs etc) should be used or native speakers could be invited to class.
- iii. Listeners would have "expectations" about how a conversation might go, what they are going to hear and what their interlocutor is going to say. The implication is that there should be pre-listening activities to prepare students for what they will hear.
- iv. Listeners have contextual knowledge about the speaker and the situation. Thus, pre-listening activities should ensure that students are privy to contextual knowledge.
- v. People listen for a purpose and they have a specific reason for listening. Hence it is vital that students are asked to listen for something during their While-listening exercises.
- vi. Often spoken language is simply for social interaction and not for exchange of ideas or information. Therefore students should not be asked to listen for facts all the time. Students should be encouraged to listen for gestures, attitudes and feelings too.

Besides the above characteristics listed, Brown and Yule (1983) and Sheerin (1987) pointed out that listening comprehension is not a "100 percent notion". Students should therefore be trained to operate with partial reasonable interpretations of what they are listening and not be expected to process every word (Brown and Yule (1983)).

### **Types Of Listening**

Studies have been done on various kinds or types of listening (Tidyman, Smith and Butterfield 1959; Anderson 1964; Burns and Lowe 1966; Barker 1971; Allen 1976; Petty, Petty and Becking 1985).

Allen (1976) categorized the types of listening as;

- i. simple listening - hearing sounds without any particular meaning to the sounds
- ii. discriminative listening - listening to hear and identify the likenesses and differences in sounds
- iii. listening for information,
- iv. listening to organize ideas,
- v. listening for main points,

- vi. listening for varied points of view,
- vii. critical listening
- viii. creative listening.

Burns and Lowe (1966) categorized listening into three types:

- i. appreciative (enjoying the development of a story; listening for pleasing rhythm; reacting to the mood set by the author);
- ii. informational listening for the answer to a specific question; listening to follow directions; following sequence; listening for main ideas);
- iii. critical (discriminating between fact and opinion; detecting prejudice and bias; sensing the speaker's purpose.

According to Burns and Lowe (1966) some authors have also suggested levels of listening such as little conscious listening, half listening, listening passively, listening and expressing some reaction and listening with a real meeting of the minds. However Burns and Lowe (1966) pointed out that there is no research evidence to indicate such levels.

Some researchers have categorized listening into extensive and intensive listening. According to Broughton et al. (1978) extensive listening is concerned with the freer more general listening to natural English. It serves the function of letting the student hear the vocabulary items and structures which are unfamiliar to him, interposed in the flow of language which is in his capacity to handle.

Rixon (1986) added that extensive listening is listening for pleasure and interest without having to pay a lot of attention to content and language. Extensive listening keeps the student's motivation and interest high, as well as give valuable extra contact with English in its spoken form. Story telling is an example of extensive listening.

In contrast, intensive listening is much more controlled, with one or two specific points. Intensive listening can be primarily for language items as part of the language teaching programme or it can be for general comprehension and understanding (Broughton et al. 1978).

Rixon (1986) also stated that intensive listening is the more widely used form in the classroom. In intensive listening, students have to collect or organize information. The listening passages used usually contain more concrete information and may be quite densely packed. Hammerly (1982) stated that learners at beginning and intermediate levels should spend most of their listening time in listening intensively to graded materials.

### **Some Techniques For Listening**

Sheerin (1987) stated that important considerations in actually teaching effective listening are adequate preparation, adequate support and provision of appropriate tasks. However diagnosis of error patterns, together with positive feedback and remedial action are also vital in teaching listening.

Brown (1978) and Sheerin (1987) stated that prediction is a key process in understanding spoken language. The ability to predict means that they do not have to pay attention to, and actively process every phoneme, syllable, word, phrase or even tone of the message. Hence all listening material for foreign or second language learners should be fully contextualized. Language teachers should set up useful predictions and activate relevant concepts and experiences in the learners' minds before they

listen in class. Visual support should also be given during listening as visuals enable learners to predict more accurately. Listening tasks should also be appropriate to the discourse type. Sheerin (1987) also emphasized the value of positive feedback for the learners.

### **Materials For Teaching Listening**

Listening materials should be carefully graded so as to introduce a bare minimum of unfamiliar words. Listening passages should use normal speed from the start as slowed down speech is distorted and leads to learners relying on auditory cues that will not be present in normal speech. The speech should also include the usual redundancies of informal speech, including pauses, repetitions, saying the same thing in two different ways.

There are also three ways of acquiring materials: (i) buying published materials (ii) adapting published materials (iii) writing your own materials. Regarding the recording of materials, there are three types of constructed listening passages: tightly-scripted, semi-scripted and unscripted.

### **Some Problems Of Listening In English**

Some problems in listening are related to the speed of delivery and the language used by the speaker. Since these are beyond the learner's control, the learner is unable to keep up with the speaker. Hence he fails to grasp the whole meaning of the text. Being unfamiliar with the sounds, stress, intonation and rhythm of naturally spoken English, the learner also faces difficulties especially if the speaker has a different accent.

Other problems are due to a lack of concentration, distractions inside and outside the classroom, the tendency of the listener to try to understand every thing in the listening text (Lee 1986). As pointed out by Rixon (1986) problems in listening arise because spoken words do not stay still to be scrutinized and puzzled over as written words.

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