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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of listening comprehension in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) and argues that more emphasis should be given to listening comprehension. It cites significant research findings in second language acquisition and reviews the relationship between listening comprehension and language learning. Research suggests that listening is prerequisite to other language skills, speaking, reading, and writing, and listening should be the primary skill to be acquired in learning a new language. There are major reasons for applying the listening-first approach. Listening comprehension sets a foundation for the future acquisition of speaking. Emphasis on aural comprehension training, and relaxation of the requirement for oral production in the initial phase of instruction, fosters development of linguistic competence, and produces better results than those obtained through intensive oral practice.

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is commonly associated with speaking that language, and learners are enamored with speaking the language immediately. As for teachers, they are more than likely to plunge students right into speaking. Children have months of listening to their native language before they even utter their first word. But when a person is taught a foreign language, he is expected to speak the language from day one.

Listening should be the first and foremost skill to be acquired in learning a new language. Understanding spoken words is prerequisite to speaking, reading, and writing; comprehension should precede reproduction. Research has shown strong evidence that listening comprehension and language acquisition are closely related. Further, listening skill transfers to other skills, and promoting listening skills before focusing on oral skills results in increased second language acquisition.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The argument emphasizing listening comprehension in language learning is compelling inasmuch as there is sufficient evidence that acquisition of listening skills leads to acquisition of other language skills, i.e., speaking, reading, and writing.

However, language teachers have not fully adopted the listening-first approach. This is probably due to the following:

- a. Listening is considered a skill that will be acquired naturally by teaching speaking and reading.
- b. Teaching listening comprehension is not a neatly laid-out method to use.
- c. Listening may be viewed as passive and is only incidental to learning to speak, which is viewed as active.
- d. Language teachers themselves have had grammar classes, pronunciation classes, civilization classes, but not listening comprehension classes.

Most EFL programs emphasize effective speaking and listening is superficially treated in language classes. Further, there seem to be much fewer teaching materials for listening than for speaking or reading. This is because comprehension processes are still not well understood and because teachers often assume that students will somehow develop listening skills once they are taught speaking.

Some of the reasons for applying the listening-first approach are as follows. First, listening comprehension lays a foundation for the future acquisition of speaking. Second, emphasis on aural comprehension training and relaxation of the requirement for oral production in the initial phase of instruction foster development of linguistic competence and produce better results than those obtained through intensive oral practice.

Too often, teachers, using the audio-lingual approach, plunge students directly into speaking even when students have little or no comprehension of the drills they are

forced to undertake. This causes unnecessary anxiety on the part of the students and can further delay the acquisition of language skills. Such an approach is due to the general thinking that language learning is learning to talk. This ignores, perhaps unintentionally, the importance of listening and overlooks the fact that communication is a two-way process; a person must first understand what the other person is saying before he can make a response. However, in many EFL classes, the extent of aural training is only nominal and is limited to listening to the teacher's reading of English texts.

III. THE NATURE OF LISTENING

Listening defined

Listening is defined differently by different scholars. Chastain (1971) defined the goal of listening comprehension as being able to understand native speech at normal speed in an unstructured situation. Morley (1972) defined it as including not only basic auditory discrimination and aural grammar, but also reauditorizing, extracting vital information, remembering it, and relating it to everything that involves processing or mediating between sound and construction of meaning. Postovsky (1975, p.19) said, "Listening ranges in meaning from sound discrimination to aural comprehension (i.e., actual understanding of the spoken language)." Goss (1982) stated that listening is a process of taking what you hear and organizing it into verbal units to which you can

apply meaning. Applied to speech processing, listening requires that you structure the sounds that you hear and organize them into words, phrases, sentences, or other linguistic units.

Brown and Yule (1983) explained listening as follows:

Listening comprehension could mean that a person understands what he has heard. However, in EFL teaching, it often is taken to mean that the listener can repeat the text, even though the listener may reproduce the sound without real comprehension. "If he could actually learn the text as he heard it, he would probably be said to have understood it" (p. 58).

Dirven and Oakeshott-Taylor (1984) described listening comprehension as follows:

The term listening comprehension is a typical product of teaching methodology, and is matched in phonetic and psycholinguistic research by expressions such as speech understanding, spoken language understanding, speech recognition and speech perception (p. 326).

Bowen, Madsen and Hilferty (1985) defined listening as:

Listening is attending to and interpreting oral language. The student should be able to hear oral speech in English, segment the stream of sounds, group them into lexical and syntactic units (words, phrases, sentences), and understand the message they convey (p. 73).

James (1984) explained listening as:

... listening is tightly interwoven with other language skills. Let us begin by clarifying what is meant by listening. First of all, it is not a skill, but a set of skills all marked by the fact that they involve the aural perception of oral signals. Secondly, listening is not "passive." A person can hear something but not be listening. His or her short-term memory may completely discard certain incoming sounds but concentrate on others. This

involves a dynamic interaction between perception of sounds and concentration on content (p.129).

Although these definitions were somewhat different from each other to a certain extent, they basically considered listening comprehension as an activity in which listeners employ a variety of mental processes in an effort to decode the meaning from oral texts. The means employed by the listener to comprehend, learn, or retain new information from utterances are referred to as listening comprehension strategies. James (1984) broke down listening into different components:

1. The sonic realization
2. The segmental/supra-segmental form.
3. The musical pitch and rhythm
4. The lexical phrasing
5. The purpose of the message intended by the speaker
6. The actualization of the message in the listener (p. 130)

Importance of listening

Research suggests that listening should be the primary skill in learning a new language. There is evidence that promoting listening comprehension results in increased acquisition of the other language skills and consequently leads to acquisition of the target language. It is only logical that one cannot give an output (speak) correctly unless one comprehends the input (listening comprehension).

Listening is the most frequently used language skill of the four language skills, (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Listening is the primary means by which incoming ideas

and information are taken in (Devine, 1982). Adults spend in communication activities 45% listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading, and only 9% (Rivers & Temperly, 1978). Gilbert (1988) noted that students from kindergarten through high school spend 65-90% of their communication time for listening. Wolvin and Coakley (1988) said that, in and out of the classroom, listening consumes more of daily communication time than other forms of verbal communication.

Listening plays a critical role in the cognitive processes that shape output and produce improvement in oral proficiency. According to Rubin (1995), “For second language/foreign language learners, listening is the skill that makes the heaviest processing demands because learners must store information in short term memory at the same time as they are working to understand the information” (p. 8). Furthermore, she explained, “Whereas in reading learners can go over the text at leisure, they generally don’t have the opportunity to do so in listening” (p. 8).

Rost (1991) summarized the importance of listening in second language learning as follows:

1. Listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin.
2. Authentic spoken language presents a challenge for the learner to understand language as native speakers actually use it.

3. Listening exercises provide teachers with a means for drawing learners' attention to new forms (vocabulary, grammar, new interaction patterns) in the language (pp. 141-142).

Thus, listening is essential not only as a receptive skill but also is pivotal in the development of spoken language proficiency.

Listening-first approach

Learning a foreign language is commonly considered as speaking that language, and learners are enamored with speaking the language immediately. However, listening is prerequisite to developing other language skills; it should precede speaking, reading, and writing (Devine, 1982; Wolvin & Coakley, 1988). An examination of the realities of first and second language acquisition reveals that immediate oral practice is not recommended for developing both aural and oral competence in a second language. In fact, delaying oral production may be preferable until learners feel they are "ready" (Devine, 1982; Gilman & Moody, 1984; Krashen, 1981; Park, 2002; Ringbom, 1992; Rivers & Temperly, 1978; Wolvin & Coakley, 1988).

The listening-first approach was pioneered by Postovsky (1974, 1975), who demonstrated advantages in delaying oral practice at the beginning of foreign language learning. Postovsky contended that intensive oral practice is not productive in the initial phase of instruction and should be delayed until the student is better prepared for the task, until he has learned to understand the spoken language.

Postovsky reasoned that in acquiring the ability to decode, the language learner must develop recognition knowledge. To encode, he must develop retrieval knowledge and that time is better spent on developing the student's capacity to decode, especially in the initial phases of a language program. He proposed that the production of speech is an end result of complex and mostly covert processes which constitute linguistic competence and claimed that students' producing error-ridden varieties of the target language create interference. He called the students' hearing themselves more than the authentic language a "handicap" (Postovsky, 1975).

In the audio-lingual class where each student is vocally active, students hear their own speech output more than they hear the teacher's. The auditory input which they are processing, then, is not the authentic language they wish to learn, but the classroom dialect rich with all the distortions that are peculiar to the beginning students' speech output. When this distorted system is internalized, it becomes a new source of interference in comprehension of the target language (Postovsky, 1975, p 20).

It is not surprising, therefore, that after extensive study of a foreign language students still experience marked difficulty in understanding a native speaker, while displaying considerable fluency among themselves (Postovsky, 1974, p. 231)

Other scholars have also advocated the listening-first approach to language instruction (Asher, Kusudo, & de la Torre, 1974; Omaggio Hadley, 1993; Winitz, 1981).

Krashen argued that early emphasis on speaking is not only wasteful but also can be harmful since it takes up time that could be more productively spent on providing input. Forcing the learner to say things before he has internalized the necessary language rules

creates anxiety and encourages errors, which might be difficult to eliminate later

(Krashen, 1985).

Listening as an active process

Of the four language skills, listening and reading are considered by linguists as receptive while speaking and writing are said to be productive. However, this does not mean that the learner's task is to listen passively. On the contrary, the learner needs to keep mentally active in order to gain comprehension. Many scholars have argued that listening is not a passive but an active process of constructing meaning from a stream of sounds (McDonough, 1999; Murphy, 1991; O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989; Purdy, 1997; Rivers & Temperly, 1978). Listeners do not passively absorb the words, but actively attempt to grasp the facts and feelings in what they hear by attending to what the speaker says, to how the speaker says it, and to the context in which the message is delivered (Purdy 1997).

O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989) stated that listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener construes meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge. "It is, of course, clear that we cannot see and observe the cognitive process of listening" (p. 434).

Transfer of listening to other skills

In a language classroom, listening ability plays a significant role in the development of other language skills. Research has shown that promoting listening skills will result in positive transfer to other skills (Asher, 1986; Postovsky, 1981; Gary & Gary, 1981). Postovsky's studies (1975) supported his argument for the listening-first approach, which showed a high degree of transfer from listening to other language skills. His experiment showed that students scored lower in the four language skills when they were required to develop speaking and listening skills simultaneously than when they focused only on listening.

Listening can also help learners build vocabulary, develop language proficiency, and improve language usage. Cayer, Green, and Baker (1971) found that students' proficiency in reading as well as speaking and written communication was directly related to students' proficiency in listening. Dunkel (1986) asserted that developing proficiency in listening comprehension is the key to achieving proficiency in speaking. Listening skill is not only the basis for the development of the other skills but also the means by which learners make initial contact with the target language and its culture (Curtain & Pesola, 1988). Bridgeman and Harvey (1998) cited several studies which correlated test scores of speaking and listening and reported a correlation of 0.5-0.6 while Messick (1996) reported a high correlation of 0.91.

With respect to the transfer of listening to reading, there is strong evidence of a high transfer. Reeds, Winitz and Garcia (1977) demonstrated significant development of reading skill for learners to translate from written German to English after eight hours of listening and yet with no practice in reading German. Asher et al. found a high degree of transfer from listening to writing. After 90 hours of Spanish language training in listening, with almost no direct instruction in writing, students performed beyond the 50th percentile rank for listening, speaking, and writing on the Pimsleur Spanish Proficiency Test (Glisan, 1986). Consequently, a person who does well in listening comprehension is likely to do well in that language in terms of the overall performance.

Neglect of listening comprehension

Despite the importance of listening practice in language instruction, the teaching of listening comprehension is often neglected in EFL instruction without understanding its importance. It is the most neglected of all language skills as English language classes still emphasize mostly the skills of speaking and reading. Listening is mistakenly regarded as a skill that can be acquired automatically once the learner goes through the general process of studying the target language.

Language instruction has been in existence for centuries and during the last few decades programs in English instruction have taken on many formats from private

tuition to formal structured classroom setting. Richards (1990) made the following comments about conversation classes:

The 'conversation class' is something of an enigma in language teaching. In some language programs it's an opportunity for untrained native speakers to talk for the duration of a class period, using whatever resources and techniques the teacher can think of. In language programs where trained language teachers are available, they are often left to their own resources and encouraged to dip into whatever materials they choose in order to provide in both 'accuracy' and 'fluency' (p. 67).

The audio-lingual approach has been a major culprit for the general neglect as it emphasizes a canned approach in the repetition and drill method without producing communicative competence. In the audio-lingual method, listening has been largely listening for speaking rather than listening for comprehension. In terms of the teaching strategy, too often, teachers, using the audio-lingual approach, force students to speak in a drill conversation even when students have little or no comprehension of the drills they are forced to undertake. This causes unnecessary anxiety on the part of the students and can further delay the acquisition of language skills. Such an approach is due to the general assumption that language learning is learning to talk.

The audio-lingual emphasis on language learning as a habit formation, coupled with the active (production) versus passive (reception) dichotomy, allows little room for teaching listening comprehension. Traditionally, in the field of foreign language teaching, both teachers and learners have tended to underestimate the complexity of the

learning task. This tendency can be traced directly to such common sense notion as "learning by doing" and "practice makes perfect" and to the position assumed by behavioristic psychology that language learning can be described by the imitation-repetition and analogy paradigm (Postovsky, 1981).

III. LISTENING SKILLS TO BE ACQUIRED

Listening comprehension is a series of processes that are dependent upon acquiring listening skills. In order to understand the second language utterances, the learner must draw from his knowledge of the phonology, syntax, lexicon, culture of the target language, and auditory memory and apply these fields of knowledge simultaneously while listening at a normal rate of speech. The necessity of teaching listening is illustrated in the following:

Everyone recognizes the importance of the auditory approach to learning a foreign language, and yet this procedure is not as easy as it seems. The average person simply does not know where to begin listening. Everything floods in upon us in such confusion that we have no idea of exactly what we are hearing, and we are at a loss to be able to make any sense of the jumble of sounds (Nida, 1972, p. 145).

Current understanding of the nature of listening comprehension draws on research in psycho-linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive science (Richards, 1987). Listening comprehension should be as highly developed as other skills if the learner wants to be an effective communicator. Listening skill should

be the primary skill in its own right rather than a by-product of other practice, and it should be given more emphasis in the classroom teaching.

Listening skills can be separated into macro and micro skills. Rivers and Temperly (1978) said that the final goal in listening is macro-language use. They defined macro-language as "the learning of elements of language and their potential combinations" and further stated, "Micro-language learning is only a means to this end" (p. 92). Brown and Yule (1983) argued that the objective in listening comprehension should be arriving at reasonable interpretation of what the learner hears but not necessarily processing every word.

Listening at micro-level may consist of a combination of micro-skills, each of which can perform a different function in different circumstances. Rivers (1980) outlined four components of listening comprehension: recognition, selection, anticipation, and memory. In addition, she enumerated a variety of skills necessary in comprehending speech. Valette (1977) listed three factors for the skill of listening that requires proficiency: discrimination of sounds, understanding of specific elements, and overall comprehension. Although the native speaker finds listening a natural simple operation, beginning EFL students have to develop proficiency in each of the three areas. Richards (1983) listed three levels of processing involved in listening: propositional

identification, interpretation of illocutionary force, and activation of real world knowledge.

The listening skills are not separate but are inter-dependent and integrated with each other. Rivers and Temperley (1978) described a variety of skills necessary in listening comprehension.

1. Ability to understand a large proportion of lexical items occurring in non-specialized speech, coupled with the ability to guess the meaning of unfamiliar or distorted items from their contexts.
2. Ability to understand syntactic patterns and morphological forms characteristic of spoken language.
3. Ability to follow longer units of discourse with syntactic and semantic constraints beyond the single sentence (i.e., the understanding of one sentence depends on understanding one or more elements from previous sentences.
4. Ability to understand the flow of stressed and understressed sounds, intonation cues, and other cues of oral punctuation.
5. Ability to draw correct conclusions and make valid inferences about the social situation, speaker's intent, or general context of the utterance.
6. Ability to recognize the speaker's attitudes toward the listener and toward the topic of the utterance.
7. Ability to identify the techniques and rhetorical devices by which the speaker conveys his message (pp. 92-95).

In the 1980's EFL specialists dealt with micro-skills in listening comprehension.

Richards enumerated in detail the taxonomies of the micro-skills involved in different types of listening. He divided listening into three areas: a component interaction (e.g.,

conversational listening); listening for information or lectures (academic listening); and listening for pleasure (e.g., radio, television, movies).

Richards (1983) gave a more detailed breakdown of micro-skills than those of Rivers. They are similar to each other in that both require the listener's action. The following are some of the 33 micro-skills listed by Richards that are required for listening comprehension.

1. Ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods.
2. Ability to discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the target language.
3. Ability to recognize the stress patterns and intonation to signal the information structure of utterances.
4. Ability to recognize the rhythmic structure of English
5. Ability to recognize the functions of stress and intonation to signal the information structure of utterance.
6. Ability to identify words in stressed and unstressed positions.
7. Ability to recognized reduced forms of words.
8. Ability to distinguish word boundaries.
9. Ability to recognize typical word order patterns in the target language.
10. Ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics (pp. 219-229).

The goals of EFL learners should be consistent with the categories that Richards has listed. Most EFL students strive to gain sufficient proficiency in listening and speaking to be able to carry on conversations (conversational listening) and enjoy American movies, pop songs, and watch the CNN (listening for pleasure). Listening

fluency will enable students to take notes (academic listening) on lecture information and will assist them in the process of learning and retaining the information.

In teaching listening comprehension, Nida (1972) proposed selective listening, listening only to certain features at a time. Inasmuch as people do not try to listen to everything, they are selective in listening and consciously filter out those things that are not important or are inconsequential. Nida said while we can't possibly make rules for the order in which the learner should listen to various features in a sentence, "in general the order of features should be 1) phonetic features (sounds), 2) vocabulary, and 3) grammar, i.e., morphology and syntax" (pp. 146-147).

IV. STAGES OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Listening comprehension is the primary task in the acquisition of a second language and can be taught just like any other skills. Listening takes place at two steps in the communication process. First, the receiver must listen in order to decode and understand the original message. Then the sender becomes a listener when attempting to decode and understand subsequent feedback.

The following are the processes involved in listening comprehension as provided by Richards (1983, pp. 220-221).

1. The listener takes in raw speech and holds an image of it in short-term memory.

2. An attempt is made to organize what was heard into constituents, identifying their content and function.
3. As constituents are identified, they are used to construct propositions, grouping the propositions together to form a coherent message.
4. Once the listener has identified and reconstructed the propositional meaning, these are held in long-term memory, and the form in which the message was originally received is deleted.

Rivers (1980) gave listening comprehension its rightful prominence and attention and she dealt directly with teaching listening skills. She stated that listening comprehension has its peculiar problems, which arise from the fleeting, immaterial nature of spoken utterances. Rivers (1981) suggested four stages for teaching listening skills in the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels of language learning:

1. Identification: perception of sounds and phrases, identifying these directly and holistically with their meaning
2. Identification and selection without retention: listening for the pleasure of comprehension, extracting sequential meanings, without being expected to demonstrate comprehension through active use of language.
3. Identification and guided selection with short-term retention: students are given some prior indication of what they are to listen for; they demonstrate their comprehension immediately in some active fashion.
4. Identification, selection, and long-term retention: students demonstrate their comprehension, or use the material they have comprehended, after the listening experience has been complete; or they engage in an activity which requires recall of material learned some time previously (p. 167).

Teaching listening should be the optimal starting point in EFL instruction. When first confronted with a foreign language, the learner hears a barrage of meaningless noise. Gradually, after continued exposure to the language, he begins to recognize

elements and patterns such as phonemes, intonation, words, and phrases. When he is able to recognize the phonological, syntactic, and semantic codes of the language automatically, he has reached the first level, that of recognition.

Nord proposed three progressive phases in the development of listening fluency. Progressing through these stages produces a "rather better cognitive map" which has a beneficial effect on the development of speaking, reading, and writing skills (Nord, 1981, p. 134).

1. Semantic decoding
2. Listening ahead or anticipating the next word, phrase, or sentence
3. Discrepancy detection.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This paper discussed the importance of acquiring listening skills first, before speaking, reading, and writing. There are major reasons for applying the listening-first approach. First, listening comprehension designs the blueprint for future acquisition of speaking. Second, emphasis on aural comprehension training and relaxation of the requirement for oral production in the initial phase of instruction fosters development of linguistic competence and produces better results than those obtained through intensive oral practice.

It is also important to point out that the traditional approaches such as Grammar-Translation method and Audio-Lingual method may no longer be the best methods of instruction. EFL textbooks should be revised to teach listening a great deal more in EFL education. Teaching materials should be designed so that more time is allowed for actual listening activities. Educators should consider increasing the percentage of listening in EFL teaching across the board from elementary school to college. Those classroom materials that contain pattern drills of audio-lingual method that are widely used should be replaced with materials for the teaching of listening comprehension.

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