

Is there any room for listening? The necessity of teaching listening skills in ESL/EFL classrooms

「聞き取り」(リスニング) 授業が入り込む余地があるか

第二外国語としての英語授業で聞き取りテクニックを教える必要性について

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言語習得のために必要とされる4つの技能のうち、いわゆる「聞き取り」受容能力が、多くの場合、学生にとって最もとっつきにくいものとされている。ここでは、第二外国語授業で、効果的な「聞き取り」方法を教える重要性を簡単に考察しながら、その具体的な方法を提案するものである。教師が「聞き取り」レッスンを3つの段階、即ち「聞き取り前」「聞き取り最中」「聞き取り後」に分けて指導すると、扱いやすい上に、学生達はやる気を削がれることなく、与えられた課題をこなすのに大いに役立つことになる。この論文では、第二外国語としての英語授業で、「聞き取り」は単にその場しのぎに付け加える方法論としてではなく、学生たちを言語習得課程の大事な構成要素である「わかりやすい導入」に誘い込む重要な手段として考えるべきであると論じる。

Of the four major language skills involved in language learning, the so-called receptive skill of listening is often the most daunting for students. This paper briefly analyses the importance of teaching listening skills effectively in second language classrooms and offers suggestions for doing so. By breaking down listening lessons into manageable stages (pre-listening, listening, and post-listening), teachers can help their students considerably to achieve any tasks set, without causing de-motivation.

This paper argues that listening should not be viewed as an *ad hoc* addition to ESL/EFL classroom teaching methodology, but as an important means of providing students with comprehensible input, an essential component of the whole language learning process.

Key words :

Receptive skill, planning, pre-listening, during listening, post- listening.

Listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often it has been overlooked by its elder sister: speaking. (Nunan, 1997, p. 42)

As one of the so-called receptive skills, listening, like reading, has often been viewed by teachers

as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. Research into second language acquisition, which emphasizes the role of comprehensible input, has done much to raise awareness of how important listening is in second language classrooms. Learning cannot begin without understanding input (pitched at the right level) and “listening is thus fundamental to speaking.” (Nunan, 1997, p 47).

Although often linked to reading as a ‘receptive skill’, listening can prove to be far more daunting for students in a second language classroom. A reader usually has the opportunity to refer back to a text to clarify understanding, something which a listener in most listening contexts (TV programs, meetings, discussions, lectures, and to a lesser extent, conversation) cannot.

Whereas the written word stays on the page and can be looked at more than once, the spoken word, unless recorded on tape or record cannot be repeated. Of course in a conversation it is possible to ask someone to say something again, but the fact remains that while a reader can look back at something as many times as he wants, the listener cannot. (Harmer, 1983, p 176)

Furthermore, there is a marked difference in the type of language used. In writing, for example, the language is expected to be grammatically correct, a story line is developed logically and ideas are clearly organized and presented in a systematic paragraph form. Speech, however, is very different. There tends to be redundancy, repetition, hesitation and ungrammatical utterances. This makes listening to, and understanding, conversation very difficult for non- native speakers. Teachers, therefore, have to train their students to take such occurrences into consideration in order to help them understand the conversations they are exposed to. The fact that such training takes place within a classroom setting adds another dimension to the teaching/learning process. In a real world situation, it is unusual for the listener to be cast in the situation of a non-reciprocal ‘eavesdropper’. In many classroom listening activities, however, this situation is often the norm.

Teaching listening skills in the classroom should no longer be the case of the teacher switching off as soon as the tape recorder/CD player is switched on. For many students listening is stressful and, therefore, potentially de-motivating. In planning a listening skills lesson teachers should not only consider that the listening exercise is the next activity in the textbook, for example, but also take into account why students may find the listening task difficult, what are the backgrounds of the students, what materials should be used, and what will be happening at different stages of the

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listening lesson.

Anderson and Lynch point out three main characteristics that make listening in the classroom context difficult for students: 1) the type of input, 2) the support provided by the listening context, and 3) the type of task involved (Anderson and Lynch, 1988, p60). A teacher, thus, has to plan and select materials that best optimize a balance of these factors in order to help students as much as possible with the listening activities they are faced with.

At a higher, general level, the teacher must decide what the purpose of the listening lesson is. Are the students members of a General English type class, where recognizing conversational discourse is the main aim, or are they training for more specific academic purposes? If the former is the case, Richards (Richards, 1987, p167) highlights thirty-three micro skills necessary for a student to be successful in understanding conversational discourse. These include being able to recognize language stress patterns, to distinguish word boundaries, to predict outcomes from events already described, and to have the ability to process speech containing pauses, errors and self-corrections. He also identifies eight micro skills necessary for academic listening. These include the ability to identify the purpose and scope of a lecture, to recognize subject specific lexical items, to recognize irrelevant material and have the skill to collect information in note form as well as having knowledge of classroom conventions within specific cultural situations.

Even with the use of needs analysis and on-going diagnostic activities, the selection of materials for a listening lesson which best suit the needs of a specific group of students still remains a difficult task. The types of material available vary greatly. From the choice of using video or audio, through to materials that use native and non-native speakers (a major debate for which types of English will students actually be exposed to in the future) and formal or informal language, the range has become extensive.

Central to a teacher's choice of material is the issue of whether to use authentic or non-authentic materials.

All material used for listening comprehension, even in the earliest lessons, should be authentic, that is, it should consist of utterances with a high probability of occurrence. Teaching students to comprehend artificial language combinations which would rarely be heard from a native speaker is a waste of time and energy, and can only confuse students

when later confronted with natural speech (Rivers, 1981, p.168)

In selecting a listening text, therefore, a teacher should consider whether the language used is the language of speech rather than the language of writing in spoken form and how closely do the exchanges students will listen to accurately reflect real life situations. Scripted/non-authentic speech tends to be characterized by a more consistent speech rate, the absence of any overlap between speakers and clear pauses at the ends of sentences rather than the more normal situation of occurring within sentences. Authentic texts tend to reflect natural speech speed, overlaps in conversation, short forms, repetitions and redundant language. If students are to become conversationally competent they need to be exposed to these essential features of natural speech. Although it is the above characteristics that make listening so difficult for second language learners, the use of authentic listening materials should not be viewed as a difficult or de-motivating thing. Authentic listening texts such as stories, songs and radio shows can, conversely, be used to motivate students into listening to 'real' language.

Learners find it extremely motivating to hear something that has not been simplified: they feel that they are getting to grips with real language. (Field, 1997, p49)

However, given that even though many audio materials are professionally produced, using actors and actresses, there still exist "tapes which are in a sense 'over-pronounced', where weak forms are stressed and the rhythm of speech is distorted. It is important to check that the spoken English on the tape is a fair representation of normal, colloquial, spoken English." (Cunningsworth, 1984, p.52). This view is supported by Underwood:

What is crucial is that students should listen to ordinary speech, spoken by ordinary people in their ordinary ways. It may or may not be truly 'authentic speech', but, provided that it is realistic (i.e. like real life, with the characteristics of unrehearsed speech), it will give students the kind of practice they need. (Underwood, 1989, p100).

Although some teachers may feel that authentic listening texts are too demanding for their students, it is not necessarily the language itself that makes a piece of listening difficult. The tasks that the teacher sets based on the listening material are also very influential on the level of difficulty perceived by the students.

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At the planning stage of a lesson one of the main points that needs to be taken into consideration is whether the task the teacher is asking the students to do is achievable or not. (And how often do we, as teachers, try to do the same tasks ourselves before giving them to our students?) If the task is patently not achievable, this will be de-motivating for the students. The converse is true and students will feel further benefit if the tasks we give them are “designed to be of genuine help in their learning of listening skills and, as far as possible, not be confusing.” (Harmer, 1983, p.177).

However suitable the task may be, there is little point in selecting a text if the quality of the audio version is so bad that it is unintelligible. Understanding audio material is inherently difficult enough in itself. We may be able to interrupt a speaker in a face-to-face situation to ask for clarification or repetition of a point but in most classroom situations the ‘speaker’ is an anonymous voice issuing from a machine, controlled by the teacher. As the speaker cannot be seen, students do not have the benefit of gestures and facial expressions to aid them in comprehension. Poor audio quality only compounds this problem.

Classroom management is another important factor that needs to be taken into consideration when planning and teaching a listening lesson. Are all the students able to hear the recording clearly? Are they able to hear each other during student-to-student interaction? How suitable is the room itself for doing a listening activity? Teachers may not have much choice in such matters, depending on the educational institution, but they should be aware of the limits that poor acoustics and noise interference place on their students’ ability to complete a task.

At the planning stage of a listening lesson, another factor which needs to be taken into consideration by a teacher is the length of the text. There is no easy answer for this; it will depend on the level of the class and the aims of the lesson. If an audio extract seems overlong, the teacher may need to stop the recording at certain points to make it more manageable for students. Will the material involve the students and motivate them to listen? Listening to pop songs, news stories (which soon go out of date and therefore may lack relevance), and listening to amusing stories all have their place in the listening classroom. There may be the problem, however, of falling into the trap of thinking that students “are less mature intellectually because they lack mastery of a language”. (Underwood, 1989,p.104). Again it is important to find out what each group of students is interested in and try to choose materials accordingly.

Another factor to consider is where the listening lesson comes within the main course? How is the lesson related to the other language skills the students are practicing? Whenever possible it is important to inform the students why they are doing the listening lesson.

Students need to be able to see some overall direction in what they are doing, and this involves using all your resource materials, main course book, supplementary materials and your own ideas, in a way that is coherent as well as varied. (Rixon, 1986, p.112)

For students to fully benefit from both top-down and bottom-up processing, it has become increasingly recognized that listening lessons should be planned to include different stages (as well as a variety of tasks). These stages can be classified as pre-listening, listening and post-listening. Each stage has different functions, which the teacher should aim to link together to provide constant support for the students to help them successfully understand the listening text in order to complete the tasks set.

The pre-listening stage is very important. It serves to prepare the students for the listening text they are going to hear, in much the same way that native speakers use prior knowledge to match what they expect to hear with what they actually hear, using previous knowledge of the subject area to make sense of it. Pre-listening tasks help students to focus on what is to follow. Activities such as student discussions, listening to relevant background information provided by the teacher, reading related texts and brainstorming vocabulary based on the theme of the listening text are all examples of pre-listening tasks. As much as possible such tasks should be as realistic as possible, even if the fact that they are taking place in an artificial classroom environment is accepted.

At this stage of the lesson the process of supporting the students begins. Students must know why they are listening and what they are expected to do at each following stage of the lesson. Clear instructions are therefore very important. Students should be made aware that although the text will remain unchanged the tasks they will be asked to do may vary according to purpose. There is little point in giving a long list of instructions only at the beginning of the lesson, as these will soon be forgotten and confusion and de-motivation could occur. The key point again is to provide constant support for the students at each stage of the lesson.

Many students find the 'during listening' stage of the lesson the most demanding and it is,

Is there any room for listening? The necessity of teaching listening skills in ESL/EFL classrooms (Jones) therefore, essential that the teacher gives as much support as possible during this stage. As well as giving clear instructions for the tasks involved, the need for monitoring by the teacher is also important. Some students may feel overwhelmed by the listening text itself and, in order for them to complete the given task, the teacher may need to stop the recording more than was previously planned or prescribed by the textbook. To increase interest and motivation, tasks should be varied. As well as the more traditional answering of open and closed questions, tasks could include, for example, the re-ordering of texts, drawing pictures, and matching exercises depending on the purpose for listening. The level of information expected, from general to specific, will also influence the choice of tasks at this stage of the lesson.

While planning for the 'after listening' stage of a lesson the teacher should bear the following factors in mind. How much time is available, is the after listening task interesting and motivating, is the type of task (reading, writing or speaking) relevant to the students being taught? It may even be that a post listening task is actually not necessary and may only be seen as anti-climatic or de-motivating.

One reason for 'after listening' tasks is to expand on the topic heard in the listening text even though it should be recognized that such tasks are often not listening activities themselves. Examples include extending notes into a full written text, summarizing what has been heard, and role-play. Again these tasks should reflect real life as much as possible and be of clear perceived benefit for the students, depending on their purpose for listening in the first place. Another reason for having 'after listening' tasks is to check if the students have completed the 'during listening' tasks successfully. Analysis of language problem areas, for example, forms, functions, vocabulary items, stress patterns, could help those students who were not able to fully complete the tasks given to understand the reasons for not being able to do so. By using such analysis diagnostically, the teacher can then move on to any necessary remedial work in following lessons.

In conclusion, conducting a listening lesson does not just involve turning on a tape machine, sitting back and letting students get on with the tasks as best as they possibly can. Knowledge of the students' level, their purpose for listening, choice of materials and related achievable tasks, careful planning and pacing, as well as good classroom management should all come together to support and motivate students as much as possible. The 'receptive skill' of listening is increasingly gaining recognition as an important part of a second language learner's training and as such,

Listening should not be looked upon as an appendage, but as an integral part of the total package of learning, sometimes leading to and sometimes emerging from other work. (Underwood, 1989, p.93).

Not only should the skill of listening be raised from its 'Cinderella' status but teachers should carefully plan listening lessons to help students increase their ability in this essential, but difficult, skill.

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