

Unit 6

Teaching listening comprehension

Content

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The four language skills.

In the communicative approach to language teaching, the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing are dealt with simultaneously.

In addition to a focus on listening skills, for example, classroom methodology should develop the learner's ability to produce messages of spoken discourse as listening requires somebody to receive the message and respond to it.

Furthermore, reading and writing skills may be required at the same time.

- * A student listening to a lecture, for example, may need to take some notes in order to recall the information.
- * He may also use reading skills to follow a printed exercise or some instructions written on the board.
- * Learners also need the added help of the written form to comprehend listening tasks. When learners miss something in listening tasks, the written

form of the language gives them the chance to understand the aural message¹.

In the following units, we shall deal with the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing consecutively. Attempts will be made to show that these skills, though treated separately, are interrelated and integrated to the extent that the study of one can not be made without some consideration of the other. But for the purpose of clarity, we shall devote a unit to each skill. Let us first consider listening comprehension skills².

1. Characteristics of Real-life Speech.

- * Unlike written discourse which takes the sentence as the basic unit of organization, speech is delivered, one clause at a time, linked by coordinating conjunctions.
- * Speakers use pauses, hesitations, false starts and corrections that make up a larger portion of what they actually say³.
- * spoken language follows a particular rhythmic pattern; some syllables are stressed while others are unstressed. The listeners' task is to identify words according to the rhythmic structure within which they occur. They should interpret words that are stressed, unstressed and not merely in their ideal forms.
- * Speakers use elliptical forms with the deletion of such elements as subjects, auxiliaries, verbs, articles, and pronouns as redundant forms.

¹ However, learners should be given first an extensive practice in listening tasks before they are presented with the written forms of the language, so that they do not make faulty guesses about the sounds of the language from the written form.

² (For a theoretical background see supplementary No. 9).

³ Pauses may be either silent pauses or filled pauses; filled pauses contain items like "uh", "well", "say", "sort of", "Kind of", "I mean" which indicate that the speaker is making an approximation of the word he is looking for.

- * speakers also use reduced forms to express the message; they drop words and emphasise those which play a crucial role in the message.
- * Cohesive devices are not clearly indicated in speech as it is the case in writing. Thus listeners have to identify the links between sentences through a focus on meaning.
- * speakers also use reduced forms to express the message; they drop words and emphasise those which play a crucial role in the message.
- * Cohesive devices are not clearly indicated in speech as it is the case in writing¹. In addition, consonants and vowels are not given much attention to be pronounced correctly².
- * In speech meaning is constructed cooperatively³.
- * Topics are developed gradually, and discourse cues are used to signal the development of shifts of topics⁴.
- * Finally, spoken discourse is interactive: it involves the use of gestures, movements, gaze, and facial expressions⁵.

2. Objectives of Teaching Listening Comprehension.

Listening comprehension tasks aim at providing the learners with some basic skills which enable them to understand the spoken message of authentic discourse in real situations outside the classroom.

¹ Thus listeners have to identify the links between sentences through a focus on meaning.

² Speakers are more concerned with the message rather than with the patterns of articulation.

³ A single speaker does not say all he wants to say in a single burst. Each speaker adds information to the previous utterance until the message is constructed. Thus, spoken discourse is unplanned and is the product of mutual cooperation.

⁴ Such as: talking about that reminds you of, by the way, as far as that goes, etc.

⁵ Both the speaker and the listeners use verbal and non-verbal signals to indicate attention, interest, understanding and so on. Formal or informal interaction can be distinguished from the presence or absence of idioms, humour, and colloquial expressions.

Richards (1985) states that listening comprehension tasks aim at enabling the learners to:

1. recognise the different intonation patterns used for questions, statements, instructions.
2. understand yes/ no questions and wh-questions on topics connected with home life, the family, school, free time, health, shopping personal identification.
3. understand common phrases used in short conversations.
4. identify the topics of conversations between native speakers¹.

3. Classroom activities.

The above theoretical background suggests that it is essential to base classroom activities on real-life listening tasks. However, it should be noted that despite the fact that most heard speech is informal, real, and spontaneous, many listening exercises are still based on a text read aloud by the teacher or recorded on a tape. Such materials present artificial speech or oral recordings of written discourse articulated in an acting style lacking pauses and self-correction of natural speech.

Question:

T. Do you believe that these sorts of materials are inappropriate for teaching listening comprehension?²

T. Yes, that's true. They are not authentic.

The exercises, of these materials often consist of written texts taken from novels, articles, newspapers and so on.

¹ Those objectives vary, of course, according to the needs of particular groups of students; for example, whether they are at the beginning, intermediate, or advanced levels.

² S. These materials lack authenticity and therefore are poor means for teaching listening comprehension.

- * The students listen to the tape without background knowledge of the context of the text.
- * Furthermore, they do not expect what to hear and often have comprehension questions at the end¹.

T. But why do you think the majority of teachers use them for teaching listening comprehension?²

How would you deal with authentic texts?

Authentic conversations or texts need, to be adapted for classroom use; they require a great deal of selection and editing.

- * If listening materials are presented live by the teacher, it becomes easier to control the level of difficulty.
- * The teacher can simplify the information, slow it down, and provide an approximate model of natural speech.

Adapted materials of this sort can provide a transition from imitation of authentic to genuine speech. Once the students get used to listening to adapted materials, the teacher can introduce authentic real discourse in order to prepare them to understand real-life discourse outside the classroom³.

3.1. Listening exercises.

In general, listening comprehension exercises should be introduced through certain stages.

1. Identification:

¹ Such texts do not provide any preparation for real life listening situations and should, therefore, be avoided when teaching listening comprehension.

² Teachers still use such texts for the simple reason that it is difficult to prepare authentic discourse suitable for a particular level. And it is difficult for the learners to understand natural discourse recorded on a tape, follow the main thread of discourse and identify the voices of the speakers.

³ It should be remembered that the aim of teaching listening comprehension is to prepare the students to understand real and authentic discourse outside the classroom.

Through this stage, students learn to:

- * distinguish sounds and elements of meaning conveyed by stress, pitch, and intonation.
- * identify words and phrases relevant to the message.

Exercises appropriate for this stage can be introduced in the form of dialogues¹.

2. Identification and selection without retention.

This stage is intended to teach the students how to select items for comprehension without expecting to answer questions on what they hear. The students are only required to follow the theme of what they listen to².

3. Identification and guided selection with short-term retention.

At this stage, the students are given some questions before they are introduced to the text. They then listen with intention of marking the answers on a sheet of paper as they listen to the passage.

4. Identification and selection with long-term retention.

At this final stage, students listen freely to all kinds of materials. They listen for pleasure or for academic reasons. After a period of listening, the students are asked to talk or write about what they have heard³.

¹ When dialogues are introduced, the students are continually hearing the material they are learning repeated by the teacher, the students, and by themselves. In this way, they formulate an auditory image of the short utterances and recognise them without analysis.

² Simple plays or extracts from everyday conversation are most suitable for this stage where students become accustomed to listening for pleasure.

³ It should be made clear that these stages should not be regarded in a rigid sequential order. While students are introduced in the first stage to identification practice, other materials for identification and selection with or without retention can be used. Thus suitable activities can be presented at all levels.

3.2. Content of Exercises.

The content of the exercises should include factors related to the purpose of the exercise, to the speaker himself, and to the audio element and other matters involved in the process of teaching.

1. Purpose.

In real life situations we listen to something with a purpose in mind¹.

Listeners, in other words, expect what to hear and what to understand².

2. Speakers.

When introducing an audio-tape or a video-tape of spoken discourse, it is recommended that only one speaker is speaking in the initial stages of learning, so that learners will get used to particular individual habits of speech³.

Later in the course, students will be exposed to tapes with more than one speaker as the course progresses so that they can be introduced to different speech patterns.

3. Audio visual.

In most cases we see the person(s) we are listening to. The presence of the speaker gives further help to the listeners in understanding the message; his facial

¹ When we listen to the news, for example, we intend to know something about the world and current events. When we listen to a lecture, we know what the subject is and try to learn about it.

² That is to say, students may be asked to do something in response to what they hear: they might be asked to express agreement or disagreement, take notes, answer questions... etc. In this way, they learn with a definite purpose in mind; they know what sort of information to get and how to respond to it.

³ It will be helpful for the students if the speaker speaks slowly and clearly, but not artificially: he should speak in normal speech patterns.

expressions, posture, eye-contact, tone of voice, and gesture provide important clues to the understanding of the message¹.

Video-recordings of this sort enable the listeners to:

- * see what participants look like; whether they are old or young, indoors or out of doors.
- * see the details of the physical context; for example, whether the speakers are close to each other or not.
- * watch the face of the speaker,
- * observe the movement of his lips which give an indication of the utterance,
- * observe him pronouncing labial consonants and open vowels.
- * see how speakers stress syllables, how they shake and nod their heads, shrug their shoulders to emphasise a particular point².

A further support to the comprehension of the message comes from a transcript of the spoken text so that the students will pay attention to features of the spoken language³.

Other kinds of support such as graphs, photographs, maps, pictures, diagrams are also useful. Reliance on external support can be minimized as students progress to higher levels of English.

¹ Therefore, perhaps we should think again about the use of tape-recordings for listening comprehension exercises. Perhaps, it would be better to use video-recordings in which the speaker can be seen or better still depend on live speakers.

² It is clear that such clues which reinforce the comprehension of the message can hardly be provided by sound recordings only.

³ Thus, coughs, laughs, incomplete and complete utterances should be indicated.

4. A Focus on Teaching.

In natural speech, the listener is expected to give some kind of immediate response to what he hears: a verbal or non-verbal response to the question or information contained in discourse¹.

It is surprising to find that many classroom activities require no response until the end of a long chunk of discourse; such a response is often taken as a test of memory rather than comprehension.

T. Where do you think teachers should provide their short responses?

S. As they listen to the text.

T. exercises on listening comprehension should be based on short, active responses not to be deferred to the end².

In order to prepare students for listening comprehension, pre-listening activities should be introduced. These can activate students' background knowledge and set a purpose for listening. What to include in these activities?³

3.3. Listening Tasks.

The following tasks given in illustrate some of the points discussed above⁴.

Instructions.

¹ Verbal responses are often short occurring between short chunks of discourse. It is often the case that the listener uses some form of non-verbal response such as facial expression, eye-contact, interruption... etc to indicate to the speaker that he is following the message.

² Thus questions following a passage on a tape test rather than teach in the sense that they are concerned with how much of the material the learners can remember.

³ These pre-listening activities might include discussions, questions, or short paragraphs to read which provide information about the situation: the characters and the events. Thus, activities designed for teaching rather than testing purposes require many of the pre-listening tasks and tasks to be completed while listening rather than post-listening tasks.

⁴ Byrne (1989, P. 17).

Activities such as picture dictation, where the students have to draw a picture which the teacher (or another student) talks about without showing them:

- * completing a map or picture.
- * following a route on a map in order to arrive at a particular place.
- * arranging objects (e.g. pictures on an outline scene).

These activities involve careful listening without requiring verbal response (unless the listeners ask for clarification).

Completion-type activities.

For these the students have an incomplete version of a story, a description or a song (words, phrases or sentences omitted) which they have to complete either while they listen or afterwards.

Finding differences.

The students hear, for example, two versions of a story or two accounts of an event (e.g. an accident) and have to identify the points of difference.

Problem-solving.

For example, the students are shown pictures of 3-4 people, places, events (etc.) and listen to one of these being described. Their task is to decide which item is being talked about.

4. Difficulties in Listening Comprehension.

Foreign language learners will have some difficulty in perceiving the sounds which do not exist in their native language¹.

Therefore, students have to be:

- * trained to become familiar with the common phonemes of the language if they have to become efficient listeners.
- * sensitised to the general patterns of stress, intonation, and rhythm.
- * realise tone groups, strings of syllables which form a single sequence².

Learners of a foreign language find difficulty in coping with matters of redundancy and noise which characterise native speakers' speech. They find it difficult to grasp the meaning of words which are indistinctly pronounced or words deformed by outside noise.

Foreign language learners need, therefore, to:

- * be trained not to listen to every detail and concentrate instead on the general meaning of the message.
- * realise that they are not expected to know everything; they are not expected to have 100% understanding of what is said.
- * understand the meaning for communicative purposes³.

Foreign language learners find difficulty in predicting or making guesses.

- * Intonation, stress, patterns and lexical knowledge of the target language can be among the reasons that they can't make predictions.

¹ Native speakers of Arabic, for example, often find difficulty in perceiving the sounds "P" as in people/ pi: p 1/ and/ / as in thing / I / which do not exist in Arabic.

² However, such patterns are so varied, idiosyncratic and unpredictable that it would be of less value to teach them or give any more practice in them.

³ it is essential, therefore, to attend to part of the message and not to every detail.

- * Some predictions depend on the choice of structure¹;
- * Intonation can also supply certain kinds of expectations².

Foreign language learners find it difficult to listen to and interpret unfamiliar sounds, lexis, and syntax for long stretches of discourse.

- * They have to work on listening tasks set by someone else and therefore may not have breaks when they need them.
- * They can grasp the content of what they listen to at the beginning of the task and get worse as they go due to fatigue³.

The foreign language learners need to:

- * relax,
- * gather information,
- * use their common sense and discourse skills to help them understand the whole message,
- * practise how to skim for specific information,
- * ignore details and gather general information,
- * cope with redundancy and listen for pleasure⁴.

It follows that both listening and speaking go hand in hand and should be given important consideration in the classroom. It is to the speaking skills that we now turn in the following unit.

¹ For example, “but” or “however” makes us expect something contrasting and opposite to what went before. An introductory phrase such as: “there are two reasons for this” signals a corresponding discourse structure to follow.

² For example, marked intonation of doubt is usually followed by reservations: “I suppose they might come, but...”.

³ Therefore, students need to be exposed to short stretches of discourse in order to be able to follow the message.

⁴ Such skills help the listeners to use the context and other clues to understand the message.

Supplementary No. 9: Theoretical Considerations/Listening Comprehension

There has been little direct research on second language listening comprehension. The methodology of teaching listening comprehension, therefore, draws on native-language (L_1) research in psycholinguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis (Clark and Clark, 1977; Leech, 1977; Clark and Carlson, 1982, quoted in Richards, 1985).

Research in the field of psycholinguistics suggests that listeners focus on meaningful propositional units expressed in the surface structure of utterances. To arrive at better understanding of propositions, listeners make use of two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the syntax of the target language and knowledge of the real world.

Syntactic knowledge enables the listeners to chunk discourse into segments or constituents: noun phrases, verb phrases, grammatical devices, and so on. If segmentation is difficult, comprehension becomes difficult too. Knowledge of the world also helps listeners identify the propositions. The listeners organize what they hear according to the functions of utterances in real life situations. They retain the meaning of sentences not the actual words or grammatical devices to express them. This is a semantically – based view of how listeners decide the meaning of utterances.

Pragmatics also looks at meaning in relation to context in a particular situation. Pragmatic explanations are derived mainly from speech-act theory, conversational analysis, and discourse analysis.

Speech-act theory describes the relationship between the form of utterances and their functions in social interaction. It is mainly concerned with the distinction between propositional meaning (the literal meaning of utterances) and the illocutionary force of utterances (the effect of the utterance on the listeners).

It explains that meanings are the functions of the intentions of the participants in a given situation.

It is a fact that the speaker does not present in words everything he intends to communicate; he assumes that listeners have background knowledge of the world and should make reasonable inferences based on their knowledge of the situation, the participants, the purposes, goals, and the position of the utterance within a sequence of utterances.

This concern with the context as an important factor in listening comprehension is also evidenced in the work of discourse analysts and conversationalists, who make the assumption that both the speaker and the listener made use of the relevant on-going remarks through the context of situation.

Script and schema theory also describes the role of context and prior knowledge in listening comprehension (Schank and Abelson, 1977 referred to in Richards, 1985). Listeners understand the speaker's utterances not because of the information provided in the utterance, but because of the listeners' use of their repertoire of scripts. Comprehension becomes difficult, therefore, if listeners lack a relevant schema or script.