

# Top-down processing of inputs in acquiring focussed listening skills by engineering students: A practical experience



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## ABSTRACT

*Listening is an important language skill and its full potential seems not to have been tapped in English language classrooms. It is normally neglected as it is taken for granted that learners automatically acquire this skill without any special training. Experience, however, shows that listening skill requires to be imparted with as much care as the other language skills. This paper aims at discussing how to ensure successful acquisition of listening skill by engineering students.*

Adrian Doff (1988: 199) talks about two types of listening. They are:

- 1. Casual Listening:** This is listening to someone without any particular purpose. It demands less concentration on the part of the listeners unless the topic interests them.
- 2. Focussed Listening:** It is 'intensive listening' for information or for transacting business. In this type of listening, the hearer is attentive and s/he concentrates on what the speaker is saying.

Listening is a psychological process. It involves receiving the message, attending to it and constructing meaning. This process could be depicted diagrammatically as follows:

**Input**      **Processing**      **Output**  
(Speaker's words)      →      →(Listener's response)

There are three stages in listening: i) the input; ii) processing; and iii) the output. The speaker's words form the input. Then the listener processes the input. Finally, the listener shows the response. The processing takes place at two different levels: **bottom-up processing** and **top-down processing**.

In **bottom-up processing**, the listener depends solely on the incoming input for the meaning of the message. The input is received and analyzed at different levels of organization. The sound signals are organized into words; the words into phrases; phrases into clauses; and clauses into sentences. Here, the listeners use their lexical and grammatical competence in the language for getting the intended meaning of the message.

In **top-down processing**, listeners rely on their background knowledge for understanding the message. So, the input is not the only source of meaning. Through their knowledge of the words, listeners guess the intended message and approach the input to confirm if their guesses are correct.

While practising listening in a foreign language, videos are of great help. A video reduces the monotony a learner perceives with auditory learning. A close observation of the movement of the speaker's lips and jaw, at least initially, may add to the additional learning experience in the acquisition process. It is quite helpful, too, to be able to observe the extra auditory effort of a stressed syllable (in a stress language like English) which often coincides with larger facial gestures like the raising and the lowering of the eyebrows, as well as with the nodding or the shaking of the head (most speakers move their heads as they speak) and with gestures of the hands, shoulders, and so on. These gestures certainly serve as a cue to pay attention to the message.

For learners in the early stage, it is advisable to use the transcript of the spoken text to provide an obvious support. A student having greater experience with the written language than with the spoken language is to be exposed to this kind of the learning process. It is important that the written transcript should reproduce the spoken language exactly. Students listen to the audio and video speech and follow the transcript simultaneously. There must be no mismatches between what the students hear and what is represented in the

transcript. So pauses and 'ums' and 'erms', laughs and coughs are to be indicated and incomplete utterances left as such without any corrections on the transcript.

In early stages of listening, the learners may be taught sounds in English. A careful planning followed by meticulous execution of listening practice will surely yield the desired effect. Active involvement of the teacher is needed. The listeners are forced into guessing an approximation to what the speaker is communicating. The listener expects and anticipates the form and the content of the message being delivered.

An experiment was conducted by the author with her engineering students in three stages. The video recording of the speech by Malala Yousafzai at the UN was made use of, considering its suitability in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, and speech delivery for the learners (Accessed at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRh\\_30C8l6Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRh_30C8l6Y)).

### **Stage 1**

Xerox copies of the transcript of the UN address of Malala Yousafzai printed as a cloze-type exercise were distributed to the learners (See **Annexure 1**). The goal of this listening comprehension was explained to the learners thus: To test their guessing ability and to assess their word power. The learners were instructed to supply the missing words so as to fill the blanks with words which they considered to be suitable in the context. Special attention could be given to learners who find the vocabulary

hard to understand. About 5-10 minutes can be given for the guess work. If needed, pair/ group work can be encouraged.

### **Stage 2**

Learners were asked to fill the blanks with the words they guessed. They showed active participation. The freedom given to the learners in writing the words can certainly result in multiple guessing/ variety in guess work. Synonyms of the words may be guessed by the learners. They exhibit their language ability.

### **Stage 3**

The teacher directed the learners to the actual speech recorded as audio-visual (AV) listening. The learners were asked to sharpen their ears by focussing their attention on both the audio and the video of the speech of Malala. While listening, the learners were also asked to do self-evaluation of their guess work.

With the aid of the transcript, the learners' attention was focussed. The guess work provided familiarity with the audio-visual academic exercise. This method facilitates the learners to enjoy and acquire the words and their pronunciation. The academic listening activity also serves as a self-evaluating practice for learners at their early stage. These kinds of listening activities help the development of 'listening speed'. Making intelligent guess work followed by the actual identification of the words in the utterances enhances the learning phase of listening.

Davis (1996, 1997) developed a framework to summarize three types of teaching listening in the classrooms:

1. evaluative – hearing students' answers to decide whether or not they are correct.
2. interpretative – trying to make sense of students' answers by asking for more information.
3. hermeneutic – negotiating meaning with students by interacting to discuss meaning; both teacher and students can revise their own knowledge through the interaction.

In Davis' framework, evaluative listening is the most straightforward type of listening, whereas hermeneutic listening demands the most sophisticated skills. Davis' framework illustrates that listening is active and it involves interaction with learners.

In essence, listening is not mere recognition of linguistic units and their meanings. It includes the ability to predict information based on linguistic context, the situation and the topic of the message conveyed in the speech. It is a psychological process. It can, therefore, be improved by regular practice. Listening is a very helpful skill. Good listening skills make listeners very productive in the language. The ability to listen carefully will enable a person to:

- understand assignments in a better way and find what is expected;
- build rapport with co-workers, bosses and clients;

- show support;
- work better in a team-based environment;
- resolve problems with customers, co-workers and bosses;
- answer questions; and
- find underlying meanings in what others say.

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRh\\_30C816Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRh_30C816Y)

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## Annexure 1

### Oration - Malala Yousafzai – (Speech Text)

Honourable UN Secretary General Mr Ban Ki-moon, respected president of the General Assembly Vuk Jeremic, honourable UN envoy for global education Mr Gordon Brown, \_\_\_\_\_ elders and my dear brothers and sisters: Assalamu alaikum.

Today is it an honour for me to be speaking again after a long time. Being here with such \_\_\_\_\_ people is a great moment in my life and it is an honour for me that today I \_\_\_\_\_ a shawl of the late Benazir Bhutto. I don't know where to begin my speech. I don't know what people would be expecting me to say, but first of all thank you to God for whom we all are equal and thank you to every person who has prayed for my \_\_\_\_\_ and new life. I cannot believe how much love people have shown me. I have received thousands of good-wish cards and gifts from all over the world. Thank you to all of them. Thank you to the children whose \_\_\_\_\_ words encouraged me. Thank you to my elders whose prayers \_\_\_\_\_ me. I would like to thank my nurses, doctors and the staff of the hospitals in Pakistan and the UK and the UAE government who have helped me to get better and \_\_\_\_\_ my strength.

I fully support UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in his Global Education First Initiative and the work of UN Special \_\_\_\_\_ Gordon Brown and the respectful president of the UN General Assembly Vuk Jeremic. I thank them for the leadership they continue to give. They continue to inspire all of us to action. Dear brothers and sisters, do remember one thing: Malala Day is not \_\_\_\_\_. Today is the day of every woman, every boy and every girl who have raised their voice for their rights.

There are hundreds of human rights activists and social workers who are not only speaking for their rights, but who are \_\_\_\_\_ to achieve their goal of peace, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. Thousands of people have been killed by the terrorists and millions have been injured. I am just one of them. So here I stand, one girl among many. I speak not for myself, but so those without a voice can be \_\_\_\_\_. Those who have fought for their rights. Their \_\_\_\_\_ to live in peace. Their right to be \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_. Their right to equality of opportunity. Their right to be educated.

Dear friends, on \_\_\_\_\_, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my \_\_\_\_\_. They shot my friends, too. They thought that the \_\_\_\_\_ would silence us, but they \_\_\_\_\_. And out of that silence came thousands of voices. The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my \_\_\_\_\_. But nothing changed in my life except this: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ died. Strength, power and courage was born. I am the same Malala. My \_\_\_\_\_ are the same. My hopes are the same. And my dreams are the same.

Dear sisters and brothers, I am not against anyone. Neither am I here to speak in terms of personal \_\_\_\_\_ against the Taliban or any other terrorist group. I am here to speak for the right of education for every child. I want education for the sons and daughters of the Taliban and all the terrorists and \_\_\_\_\_. I do not even hate the Talib who shot me.

Even if there was a gun in my hand and he was standing in front of me, I would not \_\_\_\_\_ him. This is the \_\_\_\_\_ I have learned from Mohamed, the prophet of mercy, Jesus Christ and Lord Buddha. This the \_\_\_\_\_ of change I have inherited from Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Mohammed Ali Jinnah.

This is the philosophy of \_\_\_\_\_ that I have learned from Gandhi, Bacha Khan and Mother Teresa. And this is the forgiveness that I have learned from my father and from my mother. This is what my soul is telling me: be \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ everyone.

Dear sisters and brothers, we realise the importance of light when we see \_\_\_\_\_. We realise the importance of our voice when we are \_\_\_\_\_. In the same way, when we were in Swat, the north of Pakistan, we realised the importance of pens and books when we saw the guns. The wise saying, "The pen is mightier than the sword." It is true. The extremists are \_\_\_\_\_ of books and pens. The power of \_\_\_\_\_ frightens them. They are afraid of women. The power of the voice of women frightens them. This is why they killed 14 \_\_\_\_\_ students in the recent attack in Quetta. And that is why they kill female teachers. That is why they are \_\_\_\_\_ schools every day because they were and they are afraid of change and equality that we will bring to our society. And I remember that there was a boy in our school who was asked by a \_\_\_\_\_: "Why are the Taliban against \_\_\_\_\_?" He answered very simply by pointing to his book, he said: "A Talib doesn't know what is written inside this book."

They think that God is a tiny, little conservative being who would point guns at people's heads just for going to school. These terrorists are misusing the name of Islam for their own personal \_\_\_\_\_. Pakistan is a \_\_\_\_\_, democratic country. Pashtuns want education for their daughters and sons. Islam is a religion of peace, humanity and brotherhood. It is the duty and responsibility to get education for each child, that is what it says. \_\_\_\_\_ is a necessity for \_\_\_\_\_. In many parts of the world, especially Pakistan and Afghanistan, terrorism, war and conflicts stop children from going to schools. We are really tired of these wars. Women and children are suffering in many ways in many parts of the world.

In India, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ children are victims of \_\_\_\_\_ labour. Many schools have been destroyed in Nigeria. People in Afghanistan have been affected by extremism. Young girls have to do domestic child labour and are forced to get married at an early age. Poverty, ignorance, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and the \_\_\_\_\_ of basic rights are the main problems, faced by both men and women.

Today, I am focusing on women's rights and girls' education because they are suffering the most. There was a time when women activists asked men to stand up for their rights. But this time we will do it by ourselves. I am not telling men to step away from speaking for women's rights, but I am focusing on women to be \_\_\_\_\_ and fight for themselves. So dear sisters and brothers, now it's time to speak up. So today, we call upon the world leaders to change their \_\_\_\_\_ policies in favour of peace and prosperity. We call upon the world leaders that all of these deals must protect women and children's rights. A deal that goes against the rights of women is unacceptable.

We call upon all governments to \_\_\_\_\_ free, \_\_\_\_\_ education all over the world for every child. We call upon all the governments to fight against terrorism and violence. To protect children from \_\_\_\_\_ and harm. We call upon the developed nations to support the expansion of education opportunities for girls in the developing world. We call upon all communities to be tolerant, to reject prejudice based on caste, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, colour, religion or agenda to ensure freedom and equality for women so they can flourish. We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back. We call upon our sisters around the world to be brave, to embrace the strength within themselves and realise their full potential.

Dear brothers and sisters, we want schools and education for every child's bright future. We will continue our journey to our \_\_\_\_\_ of peace and education. No one can stop us. We will speak up for our rights and we will bring change to our voice. We believe in the power and the strength of our words. Our words can change the whole world because we are all together, united for the cause of \_\_\_\_\_. And if we want to achieve our goal, then let us empower ourselves with the weapon of knowledge and let us shield ourselves with unity and togetherness.

Dear brothers and sisters, we must not forget that millions of people are suffering from poverty and \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. We must not forget that millions of children are out of their schools. We must not forget that our sisters and brothers are waiting for a bright, peaceful future.

So let us wage a \_\_\_\_\_ struggle against illiteracy, poverty and \_\_\_\_\_, let us pick up our books and our pens, they are the most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world. \_\_\_\_\_ is the only solution. Education first. Thank you.

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**Language/Literature**

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Reports should be sent to [srajagopalan7@gmail.com](mailto:srajagopalan7@gmail.com) cc [ramanipn@gmail.com](mailto:ramanipn@gmail.com)

**Last date for submission of reports is 1-3-2015.**