Academic Listening Skills in the Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

In a scenario where students are more inclined to e-devices such as android mobile phones, laptops, palmtops, tablets and i-pads via online classes, listening has emerged as the frontbencher relegating all the other skills. Academic Language Proficiency is the narrow stream of linguistic competence that comes under the umbrella term "Communication Skills" and the ways of honing the academic listening skills with the ultimate objective of the enhancement of academic language proficiency in the Indian context during the era of online classes are dealt with in this paper. If students improve their academic listening skills by making use of the strategies listed in this paper, then they can eventually improve their overall Cognitive Academic Listening Proficiency(CALP).

Keywords: Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP); academic listening; online classes.

Introduction

In this digital era of online (virtual) classes, Indian students are more inclined to e-devices such as android mobile phones, laptops, palmtops, tablets and i-pads for their academics. The current situation has inadvertently led the students to be in a context-reduced environment where they are totally dependent upon the virtual lecture delivered by a virtual teacher in a virtual academic classroom.

They have to listen carefully and take notes. The virtual teacher may be sharing interesting animations and enlightening PowerPoint presentations about the concepts being delivered with an intention to drive home the facts to the students.

However, students from vernacular medium find it very difficult to get tuned to the accent and intonation of the teacher's delivery in English. Despite the unrelenting and unflinching efforts of the teachers to stay digitally connected with the students online, the students have to follow meticulously what the virtual teacher is explaining or narrating by attentive and active listening. Passive listening in virtual academic classrooms will definitely have its toll on the academic proficiency of the student community. In such a scenario, listening plays an essential and indispensable role in enhancing the overall academic proficiency of students. Academic Language Proficiency is the narrow domain of linguistic competence that comes under the umbrella term "Communication Skills" and the strategies to enhance the academic listening skills of the students in the Indian context are dealt with in this paper.

Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) Vs Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)

BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) are the terms devised by Jim Cummins and they refer to the different stages of learning that English language learners go through. Cummins demonstrated his ideas about the two principal continua of second language development in a simple matrix. BICS describes the development of conversational fluency (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) in the second language, whereas CALP describes the use of language in decontextualized academic situations (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency).

According to Baker (2006) "BICS is said to occur when there are contextual supports and props for language delivery. Face-to-face `context embedded´ situations provide, for example, non-verbal support to secure understanding. Actions with eyes and hands, instant feedback, cues and clues support verbal language. CALP, on the other hand, is said to occur in 'context reduced' academic situations. Where higher-order thinking skills (e.g., analysis, synthesis, evaluation) are required in the curriculum, language is `disembedded´ from a meaningful, supportive context. Where language is `disembedded´ the situation is often referred to as `context reduced´." (Baker, 2006, p. 174)

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) refers to the stage of learning that English language learners go through after they have mastered the social language. In this stage, learners attempt to master the academic technical language and become proficient in articulating their views in a range of contexts including curriculum subject area demands such as hypothesizing, debating, reasoning, questioning and generalizing. It can be defined as the language ability required for academic achievement in a context-reduced environment. Examples of context-reduced environments include classroom lectures and textbook reading assignments, where there are few environmental cues (facial expressions, gestures).

When Indian students attend online classes or try to gain online certificates by means of online education platforms, they are definitely in a context reduced environment as they will not be in a position to be face to face with the lecturer. In this setup, if they hone and improve their academic listening skills in English, it will indirectly help them to facilitate their academic career.

Renewed Interest in Academic Listening

Being the lingua franca, library language and computer language, English has emerged as the most important language in the world today. In this era of online classes, listening, the neglected skill of yesteryears has suddenly occupied centre stage driving reading to the backseat. Apart from regular online classes, this phenomenon has occurred due to the skyrocketing of online educational applications like Byju's, neoStencil, unacademy, Onlinetyari and Stepathon etc., in addition to regular online classes in the Indian institutions. The steep increase in the paid users of the above platforms is solid proof of the paradigmatic shift in the

educational mode taking place in the Indian educational sector. In such a scenario, the Indian student is in a drastic need to hone his academic listening skills and aural comprehensible input must be given to the students as part of the language teaching programme. This is one of the main reasons for the renewed interest in the arena of academic listening.

The Indispensability of Listening Competence

"No one is as deaf as the person who will not listen" is an often repeated proverb. Listening comprehension lies at the heart of language learning, but it is the least understood and least researched skill (Vandergrift,2007). The development of L2 listening skills has demonstrated a beneficial impact on the development of other skills (Rost 2002). In the second language context, listening without proper comprehension is merely hearing.

Listening is often perceived by language learners as the most difficult language skill to learn and, consequently, can become a source of anxiety for L2 learners. When a student educated in vernacular medium enters the portals of college, the paradigmatic shift of language instruction from regional language to English is a great barrier to his academic language proficiency. In that case, if they hone their academic listening skill in the target language, they can really enhance their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency. In a paper entitled, "Paths to Competence in Listening Comprehension" Krashen et al. believe that one of the methods to enhance the listening ability of ESL learners is Academic Listening, by providing

aural comprehensible input as part of a language teaching program.

External factors that affect academic listening

Academic listening of Indian students is affected by many external factors. Many barriers co-exist in the process of their listening comprehension. Student listeners have to be aware of the topic in which the lecture is to be delivered. The voice of the speaker must be clear and audible. It must necessarily be in either a neutral accent or in an accent with which the student is very familiar. The context of the lecture should be relevant to the topic being discussed or else the entire listening process will turn futile. External factors such as topic, speaker awareness, clarity, effectiveness, and context are also important in the comprehension process (Samuels, 1984). When such factors are not operating at optimal levels, and/or when the cultural/linguistic context is unfamiliar to the listener, they become misleading or useless as clues to understanding. In addition, the fleeting nature of oral input makes comprehension and verbal learning very difficult (Long, 1990). The voice of the speaker delivering the lecture should be clearly audible and instructors should prepare students for the listening task by teaching advanced vocabulary items in advance, providing them with a general topic statement, and by explaining the listening task in a detailed manner.

The rate of delivery is another important factor in listening comprehensibility. James (1986, p. 41) believes that any recorded L2 listening text running over 3 minutes will

"induce sensory overload" unless the topic is of high interest or entertainment value to the listener. For classroom instructional purposes, he states that audiotaped segments should not exceed one minute. But this is not applicable to students who are self-learning their topic of interest through audio books or podcasts or audio lectures or YouTube videos. Clearly, it is important to develop L2 listening competence; yet, in spite of its importance, L2 learners are rarely taught how to listen effectively. In the Indian context, if some strategies to hone the academic listening skills are developed in Indian Students, in the current scenario the Indian youth can benefit a lot.

Strategies to hone the academic listening skills of Indian Students in the current scenario:

In a carefully controlled experiment, Vidal (2003) observed significant vocabulary gains after students listened to three short lectures on the impact of tourism. Four weeks later, both groups had lost some of the vocabulary gains, the higher proficiency group losing more than the lower proficiency group. Word-related features that appeared to influence vocabulary acquisition included:

1) predictability from word form or word parts,

2) type of word (technical terms, in this case),

3) type of word elaboration (implicit or explicit), and

4) frequency of word occurrence.

If the students follow the given strategies, then their vocabulary will increase and subsequently their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) will also be increased.

Strategy 1

In the first level, students from the vernacular medium must be made to listen to website content that has a neutral accent, slower pace of speaking and easily comprehensible vocabulary in which they have access to preliminary aural comprehensible input. In the Indian context, one can make use of Ted Talks or Ink Talks given by Indian speakers.

Strategy 2

Regarding level 2, the learners can listen to YouTube videos from manythings.org that will help them to get acquainted with academic language. One of the interesting features of this website is that many of the regional languages of India like Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu etc., have the audio edition of bilingual sentences so that Indian students can familiarize themselves with it. It has taken the sentences from Tatoeba.org, which is a large database of example sentences translated into many languages by its members who volunteer their time. Many of the sentences came from the Tanaka Corpus which was imported into the Tatoeba Corpus. Many stories, topics on health, music, sports space, places, people (biographies) are available in plenty so that students have enough authentic comprehensible input once they start listening to this website content. Many activities like Listen and Answer and Dictation quiz and Podcasts are also available.

Strategy 3

At level 3, students can engage in narrow academic listening to NPTEL video lectures in the Swayam website that features the lectures of a particular professor for a particular course. Actually, one stage leads to the other. And so, academic lectures of this kind will certainly provide L2 listeners with rich input for academic vocabulary acquisition because of their focus on a defined topic and their inherent redundancy. This will help the students eventually to enhance their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

Conclusion

Listening comprehension is an important language skill to develop in this era of online classes. If Indian students want to enhance their academic listening skills, they must follow the above strategies. This extra effort of self-learning in their own chosen area of interest will definitely go a long way in the acquisition of Academic Language Proficiency in their field and acquisition of Academic Language Proficiency will help them achieve great heights not only in academics but also in their career.

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