

A Framework to Enhance Listening Skills: A Few Suggestions for the Second Language Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Listening is often considered a passive skill in the process of language learning. The focus is mostly given to productive language skills i.e., speaking and writing. In the natural order of language learning, listening plays a very significant role. For the learners of mother-tongue, there is already a linguistic-rich environment where one can 'acquire' the language through the environment. However, for second language learners, the environment has to be created in the classroom or outside, where learners can learn a language as naturally as their mother tongues. Thus, the role of a language teacher is very significant to provide a conducive second language learning environment in the classroom. The study emphasizes the importance of improving listening skills for academic and professional purposes. The paper follows the exploratory research paradigm and a few strategies for second language listening have been provided. Further, a framework for second language listening lessons has also been provided. Further, a sample listening lesson has been designed for the language teachers. The implications of the paper are relevant for both language teachers and students.

Keywords: Listening skill, listening models and strategies, L2 listening lesson

Introduction

Listening is the first step in the natural language learning process. A child learns any language naturally through listening and other skills like speaking, reading and writing follow. Listening and reading skills are considered to be receptive skills while speaking and writing are called Productive skills: Most often focus is given. The focus is always more given to enhancing speaking and writing skills as they are productive skills that are required to assess someone's language and content skills. However, all the skills are integrated and if one is not developed properly, there may be difficulties in developing the other skills. For

an effective second language learner, enhancing listening skills plays a vital role. According to Nunan (2003) listening involves decoding messages. Further, Brown (2001) highlights that listening should follow responding. Further, Huges (1991) highlights two key components of listening skills; micro-skills and macro skills. The micro-skills focus on understanding what someone says, which involves recognition of individual sounds, cohesive devices, and other features. The macro skills help the listener understand the gist. We can divide the purpose of listening into two broad categories; listening for specific information and listening for global or overall understanding.

Listening as a language skill

Listening is the most significant skill among the four basic language skills (Nation & Newton, 2009). Most often, listening skill is ignored in the language classroom and thus learners fail to acquire speaking and writing skills. As per Rost (1994), listening is the most ‘widely used language skills’. While learning the first language, listening opportunities are amply available from the learners, however in second language learning, opportunities for listening are available only in the ‘restricted’ contexts such as in the second language classroom. Like any other skill, the listening skill too requires practice, so that learners can enhance it naturally. Second language teachers need to provide ‘authentic’ listening practices in the language classroom.

Flowerdew and Miller (2005) propose eight dimensions to listening comprehension. The dimensions include individualized, cross-cultural, social, affective, contextualized, strategic, intertextual, and critical (Refer to Figure- 1). It is evident from Figure-1 that all the dimensions include listening in the four various areas including processes, bottom-up, top-down, and integrated. Thus, listening is a very complex skill and it needs very special attention to be

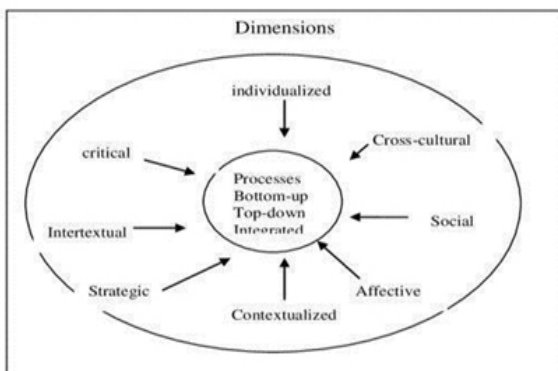


Fig. 1: A model of second language listening comprehension (Adopted from Flowerdew and Miller, 2005)

developed among students, especially for second language learners.

Listening skills and academic success

Vidal (2003) relates active listening with vocabulary acquisition which is a key to academic success. There is a general saying that a good listener is a good speaker. However, there are studies that also prove that effective listening skills are required for academic success by students. Many professors fail to realize this crucial part of the learning process, which necessitates conscious effort and repeated practice. In far too many cases, the teacher's main focus on listening skills is telling students to remain quiet so they are able to take notes or engage in every day's actions. Traditional teaching methods have their place in the classroom, but today's educators should make more concerted attempts to help underprivileged kids improve their listening skills.

Listening skill is required for academic success, especially in the context of higher education. All the teachers are expected to interact with the students in English. Further, learners are expected to give presentations and participate in the discussion. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Online learning has become a norm these days which has given lots of importance to listening skills. Students, these days, depend highly on learning from listening to various online resources or recorded classes. Thus, listening skill helps in achieving a good academic career.

Active Listening

Active listening shifts your attention away from your own thoughts and onto the demands of your potential employer or interviewer. This strategy can assist you in reducing your anxiety during an interview.

By focusing attention on the interviewer through active listening, the Learner demonstrates that:

- She/he is curious about the organization's problems and accomplishments
- She/he is eager to help and support them in solving work-related issues
- Rather than being a self-absorbed job prospect, you are a team player.

It's critical not to interrupt or, even worse, attempt to answer the question before the learner understands what the interviewer is asking.

Listen closely to the interviewer's questions, and if required, seek clarification. Do not react until the interviewer has completed speaking about possible situations that may occur during an interview and come up with strategies to allow you to listen actively.

Active Listening techniques Examples:

There is a ramification of energetic listening techniques that could help you're making a higher impact for the duration of a process interview.

Strategies for active listening include:

- creating rapport and organizing agree with
- exhibiting difficulty
- Rephrasing to demonstrate comprehension
- Using nonverbal indicators like nodding, eye contact, and leaning forward to demonstrate understanding
- Affirmations such as "I see," "I know," "Sure," "Thank you," or "I understand"
- Posing open-ended inquiries

- Obtaining clarification by asking specific questions
- Delay in expressing your viewpoint
- Sharing similar experiences to demonstrate comprehension

Learner will impress the interviewer as a smart, analytical, and highly attractive applicant for the position if you use these active listening strategies. Consider the various scenarios that could arise during an interview and devise tactics to deal with them.

Active Listening Responses Examples

Reading examples is a great way to learn. Here are some statements and questions that can be used with active listening:

- Establishing rapport and building trust: "Tell me what I can do to help." "I was blown away when I read on your website that you contribute 5% of every transaction to charity."
- Showing concern: "I'm happy to assist; I know you're facing some difficult issues." "I understand how difficult a corporate reorganization can be. What is the current state of employee morale?"
"So, you're admitting that the ambiguity over who will be your next boss is causing you stress?"
- Paraphrasing: "So, you believe we should ramp up our social media marketing efforts?"
- A short vocal affirmation: "I realize you want more regular feedback on your performance." "I appreciate it. I appreciate you taking the time to chat with me."

- Asking open-ended questions: “I realize that John’s criticism upset you a lot.” Which part of his criticism bothered you the most?” “It’s obvious that your current condition is unacceptable. What are some of the modifications you’d want to see?”
- Asking precise questions, such as “How long do you anticipate your hiring process taking?” “Can you tell me what your average staff turnover rate is?”
- Withholding your opinion: “Tell me more about your department reorganization suggestion.” “Could you give me some background on your connection with your previous business partner?”
- Disclosing instances that are similar: “Returning to work following the birth of my kid was also a source of conflict for me.” “Over the last two years, I was responsible for firing some of my employees due to downsizing. It never gets easier, even if it’s essential.”

Framework for L2 Listening Lesson

A well-designed listening lesson is a prerequisite for a successful language learning programme. There are many ways listening can be enhanced and implemented in the language classroom. The three-stage listening class which includes pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening stages is widely accepted (Chang & Millett, 2014).

- The pre-listening stage: In this stage, the teacher needs to establish the need for the Listening activities and relate them to the backgrounds of the students. The learners need to be familiar with the topical background of the listening audios. This can be done through a class discussion or by

providing relevant pictures to the students. The methodology would depend on the levels and interests of the students. Chang and Read (2007) highly recommend that students should be presented with pictures for a pre listening discussion.. Further, students may be familiarized with tasks that they are going to encounter during the listening. This will not only help for better comprehension but also would save time. Teachers must provide linguistic support including vocabulary and pronunciation support for the students. Students may be familiarized with complex grammatical structures if they are expected to listen to that variety.

- The while-listening stage: During this stage, the listening tasks must be graded. The listening audios must also be played more than once. During the first listening, students should be asked ‘global’ comprehension questions, like the mood of the speakers or rearranging the pictures. While listening to the same audio for the second time, learners may be asked comprehension questions related to specific information from the audio.
- The post-listening stage: The post-listening stage is very significant where teachers can confirm comprehension questions and clarify if there are any doubts. The audios can be played once again and transcripts of the audios can be discussed. As per Field (2008), the post-listening stage helps like a ‘remedial’ work on learners’ language learning issues.

The framework is suggestive in nature. However, teachers can design their own lessons based on the needs of their students. Each classroom is different as the students who join the classes are from heterogeneous backgrounds. Teachers

need to keep learners' cultural and social backgrounds in mind before designing any listening lesson. Further, learners need to be exposed to various accents of the English language from different parts of the world rather than the British variety. This will help the learners to tune themselves with the variety of English spoken in the different parts of the world.

A sample listening lesson plan

This section provides a sample lesson plan to enhance listening for specific comprehensions. The audio/video material to be used for the lesson is from a YouTube video where a young entrepreneur named Varun Agrawal from India talks about his journey as a successful entrepreneur. This lesson is applicable to secondary or advanced level students.

- **Pre-listening stage:** In the pre-listening stage, students can be asked about their future plans and how are they planning to achieve their goals. Further, the question like "Do you think a 'good' student is always a 'successful' in his/her career? The objective of the pre-listening stage is to ensure that students are ready for the listening tasks which follow. If there are many unfamiliar words that students may encounter in the listening audios, the teacher may plan to develop an activity so that learners do not find many unfamiliar words which would hamper their overall understanding.
- **While-listening stage:** In the while-listening stage, students will be asked to listen to the talk of Varun Agrawal and how he becomes a successful entrepreneur. While listening to the audio, students will be given a handout of 'fill in the gaps, matching, true-false' tasks. The teacher can play the audio again and

students would verify their answers and if the required teacher would assist them. Students need to understand the task types before listening to the audio. The unfamiliarity with the task types should not be a hindrance in the process of listening. Further, before playing the audio, students need to go through the questions and understand what they are expected to listen to. Students should be listening and completing the tasks while listening.

- **Post-listening:** In the post-listening stage students will be grouped based on their common future goals and develop a plan on how to achieve them. After discussing in their respective groups, students would share their innovative ideas on how to become 'successful' persons with the whole class.

The use of 'authentic' materials in listening lessons has been focused on the communicative language teaching approach. The communicative approach focuses more on the use of real-life examples which would help the learners to learn and use the language as naturally as feasible. The sources of listening are many for the students. They listen to lectures, watch television or YouTube videos in English, attend conferences or webinars, and so on. Exposure to a variety of English would help the learners to be tuned towards the different accents English language. Further, language teachers can adopt and adapt materials for the second language listening classes. The selection of the materials should be based on the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the students.

Strategies to enhance listening skills: Implications for language teachers

In order to develop the listening skills of second

language learners, language teachers play a significant role. As ESL (English as the second language) learners do not get ample opportunities to listen to ‘authentic’ listening, teachers need to consciously design lessons where listening skills should be given high priority. Teachers need to link what students learn inside the classroom with what they get to listen to ‘outside’ the classroom. Thus, the use of ‘authentic’ materials would be highly suggested in order to expose learners to various listening inputs.

A few suggestions have been given below which teachers can use in their classrooms for enhancing listening skills, especially for children from disadvantaged social backgrounds.

- Teachers cannot expect that students will learn listening and study skills at home or in study halls. Educators must take on the role of “orchestrators of the learning environment” by customizing the classroom ambience with communication-building bricks.
- When underprivileged students hear the teacher’s message, they need time to comprehend it. This process entails not just listening to what the teacher says, but also decoding and understanding individual events that often represent complex concepts. According to some sources, when speaking in front of a group, the average instructor speaks at a rate of 150 words per minute. With disadvantaged children, slowing down to 75 to 100 words per minute with proper pauses may be necessary to allow the student to absorb the material presented by the teacher.
- Encourage the underprivileged pupil to pay attention with an open mind. Teach kids how to stay calm when confronted with words or

phrases that irritate them. Words or phrases that generate such powerful emotional responses in students that they stop listening for a few moments or for an extended period of time after hearing them are referred to as triggers. When a student hears a trigger word, his or her attention is directed to the potential consequences of the term.

- In today’s classroom, effective listening by students is somewhat based on the teacher’s awareness of the student’s physical or emotional concerns. A simple modification in sitting arrangement, for example, could do wonders for a kid who finds it difficult to listen.
- Summarize your lesson so that students can use a variety of listening skills at once. Disadvantaged students have a better chance of understanding concepts if they listen to a summary of what was said at the end of the lecture in a style that allows them to apply a range of listening skills.

Though all the above suggestions are prescriptive in nature, they are highly significant in order to enhance learners’ second language listening skills. Teachers need to analyse the backgrounds of their learners and accordingly design their listening lessons.

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Conclusion

There is no doubt that listening skill is an integral part of communication skills. In other words, developing communication skills can only be achieved if the focus is given to enhancing listening skills, which is generally ignored in most second language classrooms. The present article highlights the need for listening skills for ESL students. Further, it also provides a few strategies which can be adopted by the language teachers in their classroom. It has been also highlighted in the paper that listening is an active complex process. It is active as it can be distinguished from ‘hearing’ and it is a complex phenomenon as it involves many processes including top-down, bottom-up, and interactive. Thus, successful language learning is highly dependent on effective and authentic listening inputs to the

learners, which can happen both inside and outside of the classroom.

The present study is highly relevant to language teachers. Teachers need to choose ‘authentic’ listening materials keeping students linguistic and cultural backgrounds into consideration. Teachers also need to focus on the ‘process’ of listening rather than the ‘product’ approach. The process involves the listening lesson i.e., pre-stage, while-stage, and post-stage of the lesson plan. The study also recommends that the material developers incorporate tasks and activities based on learners’ needs. Material developers need to choose a variety of listening tasks. Thus, the implications of the study are relevant to both language teachers and material developers.

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