

Teaching Effective Listening

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A. Introduction

Listening is one of the four skills that language learners have to master (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). It is actually the entrance gate of communication and the most used skill. It can take up as much as 50% of everyday communication time (Goh, 2002). However, in reality it is given less portion of practice than it should be. Even, Dean (2004) stated that “listening has been almost totally neglected.” It is probably because it requires more effort to collect and select the learning materials especially if authentic material is the only choice. It has got more important position since it was included in National Examination in these few years, though.

Listening is a receptive skill; it means that it develops more understanding than production of the language. Even though it is a receptive skill, it does not mean the learners are passive during the practice. In order that learners acquire and master the skill, teachers need to consider the following factors in conducting the teaching: types of purposeful listening, characteristics of spoken language, techniques and strategies of learning listening, and listening in the classroom.

B. Discussion

Not everyone with perfect pair of ears physically is an attentive listener. He can hear voices and sounds but it does not mean he can always listen. To listen, someone has to pay attention. Besides, learners have to have knowledge of spoken language to listen actively. Facilitating learners, therefore, teachers have to carefully prepare the input texts, the language input, and apply different techniques to encourage different learning strategies.

1. Purposeful listening

To listen attentively, someone has to focus on what is being said. One usually finds it difficult to pay full attention if what he listens to does not have any meaning to him or purpose. It means that in listening class the teacher has to make the activities meaningful and has purpose. Activating prior knowledge to predict and anticipate what they are going to learn and giving comprehension questions are examples of how to give meaning to a listening activity. In other words, playing recordings without any expected actions by the listeners is meaningless.

Wolvin and Coakely (1996) as cited by Goh (2002) state five types of purposeful listening: discriminative (to distinguish auditory and/or visual stimuli), comprehensive (to understand a message), therapeutic (to give others chance to discuss their problems), critical (to evaluate a message), and appreciative (to get enjoyment).

Generally, listening teaching is focused on comprehensive listening which develops the sub-skills such as listening for details, listening for gist, drawing inferences, listening selectively, and making predictions.

2. Spoken language

Flowerdew and Miller (2005:48) distinguish the two types of languages: spoken and written language. Spoken language is structurally loose and interactive (between the speaker and hearer). On the other hand, written language has the opposite features: rigidly structured and detached from the listener. And, listening is inextricably linked with spoken language.

There are three main characteristics of spoken language as the input for the learners (Buck, 2001): the text is represented by sounds, it takes place in real time and no chance of review, and it is different from written language. For further detail, we can refer to Flowerdew and Miller (ibid.) to distinguish the written and spoken language:

Figure 1

The distinctions of written and spoken languages

Written language	Spoken language
longer information units	phonological contractions and assimilations
complex relations of coordination and subordination	hesitations, false starts, and filled pauses
high incidence of attributive adjectives	sentence fragments rather than complete sentences
wider range and precise choice of vocabulary	structured according to tone units rather than clauses
high lexical density (nominalization)	frequent occurrence of discourse markers at beginning or end
longer average word length	tone groups
more frequent use of passive voice	high incidence of questions and imperatives
high use of coherence and cohesive devices	first and second person pronouns
	deixis (reference outside the text)

3. Listening Strategies

Listeners process the texts they heard using top-down and/or bottom-up listening process. In top-down process, listeners employ their background knowledge to analyze the information they heard. While in bottom-up process, listeners use their knowledge of language such as sounds and sentences to analyze and comprehend the texts.

Knowing which strategies learners favor, a teacher can adjust the teaching techniques to suit them. On the other hand, exposing the learners to variety of listening strategies enables the learners to decide the strategies working effectively for them.

There are 20 learning strategies identified within 3 main areas: metacognitive, cognitive, and socioaffective (see figure 2) (Chamot, 1995 in Goh, 2002).

Figure 2

Listening strategies and their functions

Cognitive	Process, interpret, store and recall information
Metacognitive	Manage and facilitate mental process; cope with difficulties during listening

Social-affective	Enlist the help of others to facilitate comprehension; manage one's emotions when listening
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Research on effective listeners showed that successful listeners employ both top-down and bottom-up listening process. They also use different strategy to process different texts. Thereby, teachers should involve a combination of tasks that make learners use some strategies.

4. Listening in the Classroom

As discussed earlier, spoken language and the written one are different. Learners have to know that they are and what makes them different. The teacher should point out those differences in order that learners realize the distinctions. In the long run, the awareness of the differences will guide the learners in producing the language. They will produce oral or written expressions appropriately.

Furthermore, the teacher can help the learners be effective listeners by considering the factors that affect listening such as age, interests, difficult vocabulary, fast speech rate, unfamiliar topic, etc. Those problems can base the material organization and task selection so that they suit the learners' needs and level of proficiency.

Learners commonly have problems (Goh, 2002:9) in the following three ways:

Figure 2 Learners' problems at different phase of listening

Perception	Parsing	Utilization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not recognize words they know • Neglect the next part when thinking about meaning • Cannot chunk streams of speech • Miss the beginning of texts • Concentrate too hard or unable to concentrate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quickly forget what is heard • Unable to form a mental representation from words heard • Do not understand subsequent parts of input because of earlier problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand words but not the intended message • Confused about key ideas in the message

In the classroom practice, Dean (2004) suggests some actions that the teacher can do to teach effective listening:

- plan for active listening;
- model good listening;
- teach listening explicitly;
- teach note-taking to select and transform information and to aid memory.

One of the essential ways to help learners improve their listening skill is appropriate tasks in order that learners get exposed to various contexts and strategies. Listening tasks can be divided into: one-way listening tasks and two-way listening tasks (Goh, 2002). In one-way listening tasks learners do not interact with the interlocutors. Goh (ibid.) categorizes the tasks based on the responses the learners make while listening.

Figure 3 One-way listening tasks

Task	Response
Restoration	include omitted words or phrases; delete extra information
Reconstruction	Create original message with words heard or noted down
Comparison	Compare information of a similar nature for similarities and differences
Prediction	Extend contents based on clues from part of the text
Sorting	Sequence, rank, categorize items
Elaboration	Elaborate using numbers, words, and pictures
Evaluation	Identify inconsistencies and contradictions, rank information
Jigsaw	Create a whole from different parts
Matching	Match information from listening to pictures or written texts
Problem-solving	Offer solution to real-life or hypothetical problems

Different from the previous tasks, two-way listening tasks involve listeners actively in oral interaction with the speaker. Two-way listening tasks offer some advantages. First, it provides an opportunity of collaborative learning. To do the tasks, learners have to cooperate with others. Secondly, it gives learners a speaking activity as well. Speaking

activity plays important role in these tasks but the main focus of the practice is listening. Thirdly, conducting two-way listening tasks, teachers can help learners practice listening skills and strategies together (Goh, 2002). The kinds of two-way listening tasks are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Two-way listening tasks

Task	Response
Creative dictation	Dictate to each other to complete a text
Description	Sequence/reproduce/complete pictures or diagrams
Simulation	Listen to and express opinion in simulated situation
Discussion	Listen to and express opinion on specified topics
Presentation	Listen and respond to formal and informal presentations

The kinds of class activity can vary from listening to teacher's dictations or instructions, songs, conversations, or watching films. The selection of activity has to consider several factors such as students' interests, age, and competence. Let us take an example of how the listening activity is conducted in class:

GAME: Simon says (lower level)

1. Teacher explains the rules of the game: the last student who never fails to follow teacher's instruction is the winner.
2. Teacher gives a demonstration of how to play the game, for example, teacher says "Simon says, touch your head," while touching his head.
3. Teacher gives the instructions until one student left.

Such an activity is amusing for learners since it contains the aspect of competition and involves physical action.

C. Conclusion

The main point of teaching listening is training learners to use strategies that work best for them. In order that learners get exposed to as many strategies as possible, teachers

have to vary the listening tasks performed in the classroom. The practices should include both one-way and two-way listening tasks so that learners get complete practices in which they can employ all the three strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, and socioaffective strategies.

In brief, the experience of utilizing different strategies helps the learners decide which strategies are effective that make them effective listeners.

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