



LISTENING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY STUDENTS IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING CLASS

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Abstract

In today's our modern world everybody accepts that listening is one of the most important skills in second language acquisition. When listening to a second language, many language students face listening difficulties. Second language learners have significant problems in listening comprehension because of the fact that schools pay more attention to structure, writing, reading and vocabulary. Listening is not important parts of many course books or syllabus and most teachers do not attach importance to listening while preparing their lesson plan. A great number of teachers believe that it will develop naturally within the language learning process and they will learn unconsciously. Actually there are number of listening barriers based on message, delivery, audience and environment. Teaching and drilling listening strategies ease students listening comprehension.

Key Words: Listening comprehension, listening difficulties, listening strategies.

INTRODUCTION

For some lecturers learning foreign language mean the ability of speaking the target language. In some aspects it is true but still argumentative. Student's main factor of speaking ability is charging with listening as much as possible. There a lot of definitions of listening. According to Chastain (1971) the aim of listening comprehension is understand the native conversation at normal rate in a spontaneous condition. Listening comprehension is a rational phenomenon listeners try to establish a meaning when they obtain the information from the listening source (Goss, 1982). Steinberg (2007) mentioned listening process as "the ability of one individual perceiving another via sense, aural organs, assigning a meaning to the message and comprehending it". Nunan (1998) states that, listening is the basic skill in language learning. Without listening skill, learners never learn to communicate effectively. Students spend 50% of the time operational in a foreign language is dedicated to listening.

Mendelsohn (1994) stated that listening has an important role in communication that is to say listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9%. Listening takes part more of daily



communication time than other forms of oral communication inside and outside of classroom (Wolvin and Coakley 1988). Listening is the skill that used frequently in the classroom (Ferris, 1998). Listening involves hearing, transforming, absorbing, accumulating and retrieving data (Grunkemeyer, 1992).

There are a lot of scholar refers that the significance of listening. In some cases it is more important than reading, speaking and writing. "In reality, without effective listening, learning is a matter of chance" (Swanson, 1996, p.3).

Listening Strategies that develop students comprehension

Teaching listening strategies to the students is very helpful (Goh, 2000). But it is not enough unless the teachers increase students' vocabulary, grammar, and phonology knowledge.

Vandergrift (1999) claims "Strategy development is important for listening training because strategies are conscious means by which learners can guide and evaluate their own comprehension and responses." (p.176).

Most researchers concluded that there are mainly cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies in listening comprehension. Strategy may change due to the level of learner. Students' language level is the basic reason that effects the choice of method (Conrad, 1985 ; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990 ; Rost & Ross, 1991). "If we expect children to become good listeners, we will need to do more than worry, complain or demand. We need to teach them become active listeners" (Jalongo, 1995:13).

Cognitive strategy

This is a strategy that is used to understand linguistic input and obtain data. Learners sometimes do not know the meaning of the words and they try to guess the meaning from the context. This is an example of cognitive strategy.

The cognitive strategies are connected to comprehending and accumulating input in short term memory or long-term memory for later access. Comprehension starts with the received data that is analyzed as successive levels of organization-sounds, words, as a process of decoding. Cognitive strategy is a problem-solving technique that learners use to deal with the learning task and make easier the acquisition of knowledge. Examples of cognitive strategies include repeating to memorize, summarizing, and piecing together details.

Metacognitive strategy

In this strategy learners are conscious when listening to the text cautiously. This method deals with learning how to plan, monitor and asses the gathered information from the listening part the same as pre listening activities (Holden, 2004).

Oxford (1990) states that the conscious use of metacognitive strategies helps learners get their attention back when they lose it. Vandergrift (2003) found that advanced listeners used twice as many metacognitive strategies as elementary listeners use.

Metacognition can be defined as "thinking about one's own thinking." Students who can recognize suitable learning methods in the proper situation. For instance, a student may understand he has difficulty in finding the connection between important concepts within a story. If he/she is taught to use a graphic organizer, such as a concept map, to identify the main concepts and connect them together using lines, similar to a spider web, then that student has used metacognition to complete the task (Nelson & Conner, 2008).

Wenden (1998) claims that students who use metacognitive strategies have the following advantages:

1. Learners use learning strategies.
2. They learn faster and integrate the knowledge remarkably.
3. Learners define themselves as constant receivers and can properly deal with all situations.
4. They have self-confident to get help from partners, teachers, or family when needed.
5. They observe and evaluate why they are prosperous learners.
6. They handle the situation when things go wrong throughout the task.



7. Their strategy compatible the learning task and adaptation are made to reflect changing conditions. Examples of metacognitive strategies include self-monitoring, selective attention, and planning of cognitive strategies.

In order to make these two terms-cognitive and metacognitive- more clear here is an example “skimming a text for key information involves using a cognitive strategy, while assessing the effectiveness of skimming for gathering textual information would be a metacognitive strategy (Devine, 1993, p. 112)” (Salataci, 2002, p. 2). Using metacognitive instruction in teaching listening enhances learners’ confidence, motivation and ability to complete the given tasks.

Socio-affective strategy

This strategy ensures and promotes positive emotional reactions and perspective of language learning. Vandergrift (2003) defined socio-affective strategies as the techniques listeners employ to collaborate with others, to verify understanding, or to lower anxiety. As in his book JJ. Wilson explains the socio-affective strategy;

Socio-affective strategies are concerned with the learners’ interaction with other speakers and their attitude towards learning. For example, they may choose to rehearse a telephone conversation in L2 with another student in order to develop confidence, or reward themselves with a doughnut when they successfully complete some task in the target language. (p.34)

Habte-Gabr (2006) implied that it is nonacademic in nature and include stimulating learning through building a degree of relation between the lecturer and student. It is necessary for learner to know how to reduce the anxiety, feel confident during listening tasks, and raise personal motivation in enhancing listening ability (Vandergrift, 1997).

Choice of strategy depends on learner’s language ability and competence.

Potential Problems in Language learning classes

Our aim should minimize the problems in order to increase listening comprehension rate by creating positive atmosphere. There are several problems which may appear during or before listening. We analyze some of them.

Quality of recorded material

Even we are living 21st century which is that age of technology still there are some classrooms do not have computer, smart board, multimedia systems and so on. The quality of sound system also affects understanding of listening.

Cultural differences

Being unfamiliar of cultural knowledge of language plays a great role understanding the context. The marriage between language and culture is indivisible (Brown, 1994). The topic may contain completely different cultural matter than the students have. In this case students may have difficulties to imagine what has been told. Here the instructors should give prior knowledge about the topic beforehand. For instance if the listening part is about Easter Day and it is not common in the area that language is being taught students cannot catch some points.

Accent

Munro and Derwing (1998) claimed that too many genres of accented speech would result in a significant reduction in comprehension. Fan (1993) pointed out that usually ESL/EFL listeners are used to “their teacher’s accent or to the standard variety of British or American English”. In this case teachers has to familiarize the students both British and American accent. It is an endless debate that what is the Standard English? Some says the British English is the standard. But English is spoken all over the world by Indian, Australian, Chinese, Turkish, and so on. In my opinion the best one is the one you can communicate.



Unfamiliar vocabulary

Hung (1998) informed that listening passages with known words are easier for learners to understand, even if the theme is unknown to them. His research represented that knowing the meaning of the words might arouse students learning interest and lead to a positive effect in listening ability.

Another problem is here that many words have more than one meaning and if they are used their less common usage students get confused.

Length and speed of the listening

The level of students play a great role when listening long parts and keeping all the information in the mind. It is not easy for the lower level student to listen more than three minutes long listening then completing the desired activities. Short listening texts facilitate listening comprehension and diminish boredom, keep learners concentration alive (Atkins et al 1995). If the text contains a lot of information, it is not easy to store everything in mind, exceptional listening ability and strategy required to understand (Carroll, 1977). Another reason makes listening text difficult is the speed. If the speakers speak faster than normal listener may have difficulties to catch target words. Underwood states that on the contrary of reading comprehension the listener cannot control speed of the speaker and this cause the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension (Underwood, 1989, p. 16).

It is clear for most language learners and teachers that a slower speech speed would facilitate beginner learners' listening comprehension (Flaherty, 1979; Griffiths, 1990, 1992; King & Behnke, 1989; Zhao, 1997). Blau (1990) concluded that lessen the input speed is one of the effective technics that helps comprehension for second language learners.

Physical conditions

Sometimes inconvenience of classrooms affects students listening comprehension. In the large classrooms students who are sitting on the back rows may not hear the recording as students sit in front. Students who prefer to stay next to the windows also effected by the noise that come from outside. As a teacher we have to take into account all this conditions in a body. The size of the classroom also makes difficult for teacher to manage the all class in group activity or to get feedback from students. The temperature of class can be counted as a factor that makes listening comprehension difficult. The class that does not have air conditioner or heater may be too hot in summer or too cold in winter.

Lack of concentration

Students' motivation is one of the crucial factors that affect listening comprehension. It can be difficult for students maintaining the concentration in a foreign language learning classroom. In listening comprehension, even the smallest pause in attention may considerably spoil comprehension. When students find the topic of the listening text interesting, comprehending would be easier. For all that, students find listening very boring even if they are interested in the topic because it needs a huge amount of effort in order to not miss the meaning.

CONCLUSION

Most universities' teaching language is English. Therefore students listen and understand the lectures. Teachers should teach the students appropriate listening strategies. There is no an ideal method that fits all kinds of classes. But we should find our students' limit, diagnose their capacity, and find out the factors that may influence their listening comprehension. Then we may offer them to complete different type of activities. Listening tasks should involve progress from fundamental to more complex as the student obtains in language ability.



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