

Importance of Listening Comprehension: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Listening comprehension is very important in terms of acquiring language input. Within this context, as the listening provides transformation of the input into meaning, it has a significant place in ESL and EFL learning and teaching. However, it is not always easy for students of different nations, ages, cultures and habits. On the other hand, the attitudes of educators have a great impact upon the development of listening skills of the learners. This paper is to provide awareness about the importance of listening skills as well as some useful suggestions to contribute to the development of listening comprehension of learners.

Keywords: Listening Activities, Listening Comprehension, Listening Components, Obstacles

1. What is Listening?

Many studies have been conducted on the development of listening and understanding skills in terms of foreign language teaching and learning. According to Guo and Wills (2006), ESL and EFL learners find the listening as one of the most challenging skill. The learners try to get meaning from the data they have heard or have been hearing. It is required to pass through some steps to do so.

Albay and Yildiz (2015) have stated that language learners interact as we speak the entry provided by auditory listening, interpreting and communicating. As it is seen, understanding the input requires a transformation of the information having been heard by making instant interpretations. Likewise, Steinberg (2007) has mentioned that it is a process of a person's recognition of the addresser's verbal output(s) by using audial organs. Glikjani and Sabouri (2016) have defined listening as "a process of receiving what the speaker says, making and showing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and answering, and creating meaning by participation, creativity, and empathy" (p. 124). Here, the focal point is to get the message of the speaker or addresser correctly for a decent comprehension of the input uttered out.

Similarly, Rost (2002) considers or treats the listening skill as an issue of interpretation of the utterances; what students do is to try to transform the data they have heard into meaning by combining the new data with the previous one in their minds. It means that the pronunciation of the addresser is very important.

However, the level of pronunciation of the learner is another challenging issue, too; because if the student lacks the basic or the demanded level of pronunciation, it is going to be an exercise of just hearing, rather than listening; however, still it will contribute to the learner to some degree by exposing the learners to the target language, but this will not be the real desired behavior in terms of ESL and EFL language learning and teaching, since the aim of learning and teaching is to contribute to generate a successful communication.

2. What is Listening Comprehension?

Literally, it means to understand what is being listened. Technically, there are many definitions for the comprehension of listening in the literature. According to Hamouda (2013), it is an interactive process between the speaker and the listener; but the emphasis is on the listener because she or he is the target audience, so she or he tries to build the meaning from the oral input. However, this process requires many other pre-requisites which will be discussed below in a detailed way.

Buck (2001) handles the listening comprehension in a systematic way. In his perspective, listening comprehension is the product of “a top-down process in the sense that the various types of knowledge involved in understanding language are not applied in any fixed order - they can be used in any order, or even simultaneously, and they are all capable of interacting and influencing each other” (p.3). As one might aspect, the input obtained by the listener or audience does not follow a regular line, because the relationship between the speaker or language producer and the product, in other words the things having been told, is arbitrary.

Likewise, O'Malley, Chamot, and Küpper (1989) have expressed that listening is the process of constructing the meaning by using the current, available data in the mind or before the eyes, it depends on many other depended sources to obtain the input provide. It can be conferred that the listener will be exposed to a salvo of arbitrary choices of words, vocabularies, grammar, intonations, stress and similar. These choices will be in interaction with each other and will affect the comprehension of the target listener by being subject to many other factors like grammar level, vocabulary knowledge etc.

3. Pre-requisites of Listening Comprehension

3.1 Strategies

According to Bingol and his colleagues (2014), there are three basic strategies to be used to be able get success for the listening comprehension. As Glikjani and Sabouri (2016) have expressed that these strategies are subject to change in accordance with the level of the target listener. The strategies are as follows: *cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies*.

It is possible to talk about two cognitive strategies; *bottom-up* and *top-down*. Bottom-up refers to translation-based strategy; it can be used to some degree and points; and the latter one is top-down that makes reference to meaning inference, interpretation, guessing and some other skills. This can be also used in certain conditions and for different reasons. Cognitive strategies have direct relation with the activities held during the classes by affecting the use of materials or the direction of class, so they will contribute to the listening comprehension of students. The educators can use one of these or mixed of either while teaching their learners.

Baker and Brown (1984) have divided metacognitive skills into two parts as *knowledge of metacognition* and *regulation of metacognition*; however, Flavell (1979) has divided into three by adding *metacognitive-experiences*. Baker and Brown have stated that the metacognitive knowledge focuses on awareness of student; metacognitive regulation is concerned with the physical and mental readiness of the learner as well as what to do while listening. The addition by Flavell deals with the experience that is related to the present, continuing cognitive struggle. Vandergrift (2003) has stated that metacognitive strategies help the educators to see the difference among the students in terms of comprehension skills.

The last item is the socio-affective strategy. This strategy tries to set an interaction between the learner, educator and the environment, in contrast to the traditional lecturing methodology. This interaction includes some elements like emotions and attitudes (Oxford, 1990). In terms of listening comprehension, this strategy is the most important of all (O'Malley & Chamot, 1987). Habte-Gabr (2006) has concluded that these strategies are the very important while handling the main topics for the EFL learners studying at the university, because these strategies help students how to deal with the problems during the listening activities by reducing the level of anxiety and thanks to them, the learners consider the educator as a resource for language acquisition via the content provided by the educator.

3.2 Grammar

One of these pre-requisites of the listening comprehension is the grammar of the target language or uttered data. This situation can be handled in two ways: the first one is that the learners must have certain amount of grammar knowledge of the target text to be listened and transformed into the meaning. In this sense, students must have grammar skills to some degree; in other words, another cognitive skill must be completed to be able to jump to the next level.

In the second place, it should be remembered that listening will help students reinforce the grammar. The learners will find themselves in an atmosphere in which the language is actively used, even produced. In this sense, the context chosen for the listening activities is very significant; thus, the educators are supposed to choose authentic materials including the speeches of native speakers.

Listening skill is one of the basic skills to acquire the language itself, because it plays a primary role during the lingual development and competence of any learner. In other words, listening will greatly contribute to the language use capacity of the students in a positive way. The more they are exposed to the listening input, the better they will transform the data into meaningful units which will be whole, not just pieces as the exposure continues.

3.3 Intonation, Stress, Pronunciation and Accent

Pronunciation is very important to acquire the target language; however, it may not be enough alone to be able to convey the sounds having been heard into the meaning. Especially ESL learners will have very much difficulty with the pronunciation issues, since some sounds may not exist in their own language. On the other hand, the educator may be another factor for this issue if the educator is not a native or from a bilingual society in which English is second language. The other perspective is of intonation and stress of the vocabularies and accent. The learners may learn the pronunciation, but stress and intonation, in other words lingual habits of the speaker like exclamation, may reveal as another

obstacle in front of the learner. The educators should take the necessary precautions by making pauses during the listening or watching activities as well as making oral and aural repetitions of the content that is being listened. By doing so, the educators will contribute to the listening comprehension skills of learners.

3.4 Vocabulary, Cultural Differences, Idioms and Phrasal Verbs

The content of the uttered material must be carefully examined before being served to the listeners. Education implementers should also pay attention to the vocabulary level of the learners. They should provide the necessary backgrounding concerning the vocabulary before starting the listening activities. The educators must provide the necessary cultural information, as well as. For example, a student who hears the sentence “*It is raining cats and dogs.*” may be confused by *cats and dogs* and will not be able to transform the sounds into the meaning although even he or she knows all the words. In this sense, the educators must provide the required information related to culture, idioms, phrases and phrasal verbs. Moreover, the educators intentionally must choose some authentic contents in which idioms, phrases and phrasal verbs are used. By doing so, the communicative skills of learners will be reinforced because the purpose of language learning is to provide communication -written or oral it does not matter.

3.5 Material Choice and Settings

Education implementers must be very selective in terms of choosing the target listening materials for EFL and ESL learners. Thanks to internet, it is possible to find many authentic sources and materials that can be used. However, this advantage should not be turned into a disadvantage for the educators by pushing them into laziness. The materials must be selected with great attention before the audience service. Professional sources should be preferred according to the age and level group.

However, the setting may be another factor in front of the listening comprehension. The physical atmosphere and necessary technological equipment must meet the requirements as well as the fact that the educator must know how to deal with the software or devices to be used.

3.6 Attitudes of Educators

Celik and Yildiz (2017) mentioned, the contribution of educators to English language teaching cannot be ignored because “teaching is a process in which educators have an inevitable role” (p. 93) with their authentic methodologies, materials and commitment to the profession. The educators are supposed to be dedicated to the profession they are holding; only by which they can set up interaction between the learner, lesson and themselves.

Teachers make use of different methods to draw attention of the learners into the lesson. For example, the attitudes of educators like asking the correct questions before, while and after the listening activities will help the learners set up meaningful conversations. To be able to reinforce the communicative skills of students, the educators are supposed to carefully treat the subjects, the context of listening and questions to be directed before, while and after the listening activities. In another way of saying, it should not be the product of an instant feeling or reactions, rather it should be done according to a plan having been prepared before.

3.7 Speed of Utterances

Another aspect that should be carefully treated is the speed problem of the materials that will be heard by ESL and EFL learners. As said above, students will most probably have difficulty in hearing some sounds due to intonation, stress and pronunciation. In this sense, the speed of the text should be suitable to the level of learners; otherwise, they cannot convert the phonemes into meaningful constructs. However, using subtitles may help to some degree if the material is served through a screen, but still it will not be enough because the learners will concentrate on the texts written on the screen rather than the sounds they are exposed to. Additionally, during the oral activities in which no subtitles take place, velocity of the utterances still will be a problem. To overcome this problem, again the educators show the necessary importance to the material choice and how to process it; in another way of saying, attention to the metacognitive knowledge must be carefully adjusted by regulation of the metacognition.

4. Components of Listening Comprehension

Chastain (1988) has suggested that listening comprehension is divided into four components. The first component is the skill to separate the sounds, stress and some other lingual patterns like intonation and exclamation. The next component is to understand the message told by the speaker, as a whole. Knowing just the syntax, sentence structure, will not be barely sufficient to get the semantic meaning (Rivers, 1981).

The third item of the listening comprehension is to process the message uttered by the speaker. The listener, firstly, hears the sound and keeps this in his/her auditory memory; then transforms it into meaning, but as mentioned above the speed of the utterance is a very big obstacle before the learner, so the message should be scattered in a suitable speed to the learners' level.

The last item is the comprehension. As suggested by Ahmadi (2016), "comprehension is the speech reception at the syntactic, lexical, pragmatic, and discourse levels [of listening in language teaching and learning]" (p.8). He handles the situation by stressing the pragmatic and discourse level. Considering the aim of listening activities, the message will be heard decently; the meaning will be obtained by following an auditory memory process and finally it will reach up to discourse level, namely, the input turns into target output successfully.

5. Conclusion

Listening comprehension has a paramount place in terms of ESL and EFL learning and use. Listening skill is one of the key skills to be used in the communication activities. The feedback of this skill will be automatically provided in the real life, rather than just being theoretical one. In this sense, there is a lot for educators to improve the listening skills of learners. They must choose very effective strategies and follow useful methods to push the students into the activities. Their attitudes towards the listening activities and material choice are fundamental in this context, because the more the learners are exposed to the authentic materials, the more they will be able to acquire the target language.

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