

Teaching Listening Comprehension

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Listening comprehension is concerned with decoding of a speech, which involves continual mental processing, concentrated attention, and memory. In other words it represents a perceptive and mental mnemonic activity.

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In current methodology listening comprehension plays a dual function: as a means and as an aim of instruction. In real school practice these two functions are closely interrelated. Listening comprehension as a means of instruction enables the learners to acquaint themselves with a new language and speech material, and serves to inculcate habits and skills in all types of communication. Listening comprehension is closely related to speaking, reading and writing. Reading and listening seem to involve essentially the same mental processes. Both are means of receiving communications from others, i.e. receptive types of activities. Both require the receiver to identify symbols and to obtain meaning from them. The process of identification is different in each case, but the processes of obtaining meaning are believed to be very similar. The general pattern of organisation is the same for the speaker and for the writer. Both the listener and the reader must be adept at such skills as grasping the main idea of communication, recognising relationships within it, sensing its implications, and evaluating the ideas expressed.

Listening as a process has seven levels:

1. Isolation of sounds;
2. Identification of meaning;
3. Integration of meaning with past experience;
4. Noting of relationships;
5. Interpretation to discover implications;
6. Interpretation of responses;
7. Introspection concerning the effect of what is heard upon the listener.

Reading involves:

- 1) perception of words;
- 2) understanding the author's related and implied meanings;
- 3) reacting both thoughtfully and emotionally to what is understood;
- 4) and finally, assimilating the ideas gained in such a way as to create new insights, generalisations, and ways of thinking and behaving.

While the same basic skills of interpretation are essential for the listener and the reader, the fact remains that each mode of receiving communications has distinct attributes not shared by its counterpart. Several differences are apparent to even a casual inspection.

The reception of stimuli in one case is visual, in one aural. One depends on visual memory, one on auditory.

Listening is frequently a group activity in which the listener's response can be influenced by his companions' reactions; reading is usually a solitary activity with time for reflection. The listener may influence the speaker; the reader is remote from the writer. The listener is likely to be influenced by the personality, the mannerisms, the appearance of the speaker; the reader is apt to be influenced by the style of writing and the format of the book.

The reader can pause to ponder context clues or even turn to the dictionary to find the meaning of an unknown word or phrase; the listener is dependent on context alone, and cannot stop to think about even that. The reader can reread and review; he can rely on spelling, paragraphing, punctuation, underlining, headings, and marginal notes to facilitate his interpretation; the listener is helped by pronunciation, intonation, and pauses. The reader is dependent on visual clues alone, the listener is frequently aided by visual clues that supplement the aural ones.

The reader can set his own pace in accord with his purposes and the material being read, the listener has his pace set for him by the speaker, the reader can skip, skim and select what he will read, the listener has the same privilege, but what he misses, he cannot return to later.

Comprehension is based on both a perception and an evocation – going back to what is perceived; to draw from it a visual or auditory image.

The first level of listening corresponds with word perception in reading. Basic to word perception in listening is the ability to attend. Children must be taught to direct their attention to sounds and to sustain that attention. This ability is, of course, influenced by many linguistic, paralinguistic and psychological factors: the physical environment, the mental and physical condition of the listener, the listener's attitude and the ability to "tune out" distractions, the interest of the communication, the speaker's sincerity, the complement of the group, etc.

Once a communication has captured the listener, he must analyse it to recognise the meaningful sounds within it. Listeners respond to changes in pitch or tone, in volume, in rhythm, for such paralinguistic means are very much a part of sentence meaning. The speaker can make the words "come on," coax, command, encourage, or direct by changing the "way" in which they are spoken.

Word perception further requires an association of meaning with the words heard. Such meaning is largely dependent on the learner's background experience, for this determines the extent of his listening vocabulary; but the ability to use context clues to the meanings of words is just as important in oral language as it is in the written. The speaker's style of delivery – his mood, his emphasis, and his organisation – also influences the meaning given to individual words.

As each word is heard and associated with its meaning, it flows into and becomes part of the total spoken message. As the listener assimilates the flow of words, he must use all his thinking skills to fully comprehend the idea being presented. Mind wandering frequently results when the listener sees his role as

one absorbing sounds rather than of weighing ideas. The speaker is probably speaking at a rate about 150 words per minute, and, since the average listener can manipulate ideas much more rapidly than this, there is adequate time for considering them thoughtfully, i.e. sorting them, classifying and relating (analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, comparison, analogy, etc.).

The forming of sensory impressions, too, usually assists retention. The listener who can visualise the scene that the speaker describes will “see” it much longer than the person who recalls verbally a list of the details used to describe it.

Inferences, implications, relationships – these are as vital in listening as in reading.

Listening comprehension should result in a critical reaction to what is heard. This means that the listener relates the speaker’s mood and tone to his purposes as well as to the listener’s. He evaluates the content of communication in the light of these purposes.

At this level appreciative listening also takes place. Appreciative listening has been defined as “responding to the aesthetic nature of a message and its delivery”, and may be considered a response to a complete harmony of the speaker’s words, his ideas, and his manner of delivery.

After the listener has heard, understood, reacted to, and evaluated an oral message, the selected content is assimilated as part of his total experience and provides background knowledge for subsequent experiences.

A study of the complete process thus indicates a need for instruction at two levels:

- 1) attending;
- 2) interpreting.
- 3) evocating.

Basic to teaching pupils to attend is a good listening climate. Teachers must use the following questions as a guide for evaluating practice in their own classrooms:

1. Are the instructions given clearly but once only so that pupils feel they must listen?
2. Are children taught to listen to their classmates so that they can be heard?
3. Do teachers try to ensure that their pupils are aware of a purpose for each language activity?
4. Do teachers adjust their voices to the size of the group and to the situation?
5. Do teachers provide group activities during which pupils are encouraged to “tune out” distractions?
6. Do teachers insist that the pupils should speak so that they can be heard?
7. Were the pupils so trained as to make the retracing feasible?

It seems logical to provide a similar programme to promote skills in interpreting the oral word. In such a programme two approaches to the teaching of listening comprehension should be stressed. The first of these is regular and systematic instruction in listening skills. The second is directed application of listening skill during classroom activities.

A basic lists of skills to be introduced in junior classes and re-taught with more difficult materials at the successive grade levels might include:

1. Noting details.
2. Understanding the main idea.
3. Following directions.
4. Recognising relationships: sequence, time and so on.
5. Sensing emotional reactions.
6. Forming sensory impressions.
7. Understanding sentence meaning (using context and speech patterns as clues to meaning).
8. Inferring (to form an opinion that something is probably true because of other information that you already know).
9. Predicting outcomes.
10. Making judgements.
11. Drawing conclusions.

As well, children should be directed in applying their skills in the listening environment in which they live and work. In the classroom directed listening to radio and TV broadcasts, to classmates, to school visitors, and to visiting teachers would help acquaint pupils with the variety of oral situations, and would thus contribute to habitual good listening in all activities involving oral communication.

The success of listening comprehension is also largely due to objective and subjective factors. The objective factors include the peculiarities of the text and conditions of its perception. The subjective factors are stipulated by the peculiarities of the listeners' psyche and the level of their proficiency. Texts for listening comprehension are selected with regards to their linguistic peculiarities, contextual characteristics and composition. The psychological parameters include the learner's ability to attend, memory, conjecture, and the development of inner speech level.

Depending on the specific aims and the extent of understanding, listening comprehension is divided into: global and selective. Texts for global listening should be short, two to three minutes in duration and preceded by a pre-listening activity. Wherever possible, the theme and situation of the story should be presented visually by drawing on the chalkboard, overhead projector, VCR, or a large poster. If the new material is a dialogue, describe the participants and tell their ages and relationships to each other. Setting the scene in this way arouses the learners' background knowledge and encourages them to make predictions about the text. New vocabulary can be used in short illustrative sentences before learners hear it as part of the lesson. Descriptive words, colours, numbers, sizes, shapes, action verbs and spatial relation are easy to model and to support with a tangible example.

The pre-listening stage should develop learners' curiosity about how all the phrases and words they have heard will fit together in a context. The new text should be modelled at normal speed but with pauses between phrase-groups.

During the pause, the phrase is analysed, interpreted, related to the rest of the message, and comprehended.

It should be clear from this description of global listening that comprehension at the beginning stage is not total, but neither does comprehension depend on understanding every word. Students at the initial stage of instruction can understand some words of the story through the use of the techniques mentioned above. They will not remember the words or be able to use them, but they will quite likely recognise these words when they hear them again in a familiar context.

The other half of the listening plan is to bring some of the new material into conscious awareness through selective listening exercises. Exercises are specially designed to offer a selection of specific discrete items from the listening text, such as listening for details.

All listening is to some degree interactive, due to the nature of processing mechanism.

Listening comprehension serves above all as an aim of instruction. This function is clearly defined in the syllabus where ultimate goals and interim aims are outlined. At the initial stage listening comprehension is achieved between teacher and pupil (T \leftrightarrow P), pupil and pupil (P1 \leftrightarrow P2) and teacher and class (T \rightarrow C1).

Linguistic component involves language and speech material. The former includes phonemes and morphemes, words and their combinations, idioms, micro- and macrottexts organised on formal and semantic principle. The existing syllabus says that the development of listening comprehension skills doesn't start with language units but with units of speech and the perception by learners of utterances, pronounced by the teacher. In this way the learners get acquainted with a series of speech units used in different contexts. When these speech units are repeated time and again they are involuntarily memorised retained in learners' memory, and fulfil a certain communicative purpose. The units of speech comprise situational utterances organised on semantic and communicative principle.

The material supplied is often limited to the same vocabulary and situations used in the speech section of the course. The justification for this at the elementary level is that the speed of comprehension is inversely proportional to the size of vocabulary. So that the smaller the vocabulary, the greater the comprehension. The more different words that have to be perceived, the longer it takes to perceive them. Of these, the frequent words are recognised more quickly than the others are. Fluency in comprehension is therefore a function of size of vocabulary and of frequency of use.

When the learner has begun to get used to hearing the language he can concentrate on developing a certain fluency in understanding its meaning. The teacher can help him achieve this through drills which involve listening and pointing, listening and doing, and through various types of comprehension games.

Listening material on tape or radio lacks visual and aural environmental clues. Not seeing the speaker, his facial expressions makes it more difficult for the listener to understand the speaker's meaning. To overcome this it is recommended to begin with short simple listening texts (not dialogues). Listening materials should be graded to the learners' needs. It is better to provide them with authentic materials rather than filtered versions. It is true that natural speech is hard to grade and it is difficult for students, at the initial stage, to listen to somebody else's speech but their teacher's. Nevertheless, the materials should progress step by step from semi-authenticity that displays most of the linguistic features of natural speech to total authenticity, because the final aim is to understand natural speech in real life [124, p. 192].

Throughout the course the teacher should bridge the gap between input and pupils' response and between the teacher's feedback and pupils' reaction to keep activities purposeful.

It is important for the listening-comprehension-class-teacher to give pupils immediate feedback on their performance. This not only promotes error correction but also provides encouragement. It can help pupils develop confidence in their ability to deal with listening problems. Students' feedback can help the teacher judge where the class is going and how it should be guided. Sample exercises should be given to facilitate listening comprehension at beginning, intermediate, and advanced stages of language build-up.

Psychological component involves perception and comprehension of an utterance to a level of forming appropriate habits and skills. Another important feature of auditory comprehension is the ability to evaluate a verbal message and specify the main idea. This is achieved by the ability to differentiate between various communicative types of sentences.

The third component of teaching this particular type of activity is a methodological one, which is mastering its techniques. Learning to attend is pivotal in teaching/learning process. It is conducive to general working climate and is achieved through a series of special positive directions that help to instil self-discipline, the ability to concentrate and a desire to retain an oral message.

And finally, numerous considerations, the realities we live in, the learners' needs, the nature of the problem, and the kinds of data required affect the selection of teaching strategies. The learners must have a clear idea of what the teacher has got to offer them and how he is going to implement it.

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