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EFFECTIVE AND MODERN METHODS OF TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses interactive methods of teaching listening. Effective, modern methods of teaching listening skills encompass everything from interactive exercises to multimedia resources. Listening skills are best learned through simple, engaging activities that focus more on the learning process than on the final product.

Key words: listening comprehension, receptive skill, productive skill, interpersonal activities, group activities, audio segments, video segments, instructional tips

Introduction Teaching listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any teacher. This is because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. It's frustrating for students because there are no rules as in grammar teaching. Speaking and writing also have very specific exercises that can lead to improved skills. This is not to say that there are not ways of improving listening skills, however they are difficult to quantify¹.

Main part One of the largest inhibitors for students is often mental block. While listening, a student suddenly decides that he or she doesn't understand what is being said. At this point, many students just tune out or get caught up in an internal dialogue trying translate a specific word. Some students convince themselves that they are not able to understand spoken English well and create problems for themselves.

The key to helping students improve their listening skills is to convince them that not understanding is OK. This is more of an attitude adjustment than anything else, and it is easier for some students to accept than others. Another important point that I try to teach my students (with differing amounts of success) is that they need to listen to English as often as possible, but for short periods of time².

Students need to apply the same approach to listening skills. Encourage them to get a film, or listen to an English radio station, but not to watch an entire film or listen for two hours. Students should often listen, but they should listen for short periods - five to ten minutes. This should happen four or five times a week. Even if they don't

¹ Mendelsohn, D.J., & Rubin, J. A guide for the teaching of second language listening. San Diego, CA: Dominic Press, 1995. p-207

² Wenden A. What do second language learners know about their language learning? London, 1998 .p-175

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understand anything, five to ten minutes is a minor investment. However, for this strategy to work, students must not expect improved understanding too quickly. The brain is capable of amazing things if given time; students must have the patience to wait for results. If a student continues this exercise over two to three months their listening comprehension skills will greatly improve³.

Effective, modern methods of teaching listening skills encompass everything from interactive exercises to multimedia resources. Listening skills are best learned through simple, engaging activities that focus more on the learning process than on the final product. Whether you are working with a large group of students or a small one, you can use any of the following examples to develop your own methods for teaching students how to listen well.

Interpersonal Activities

One effective and nonthreatening way for students to develop stronger listening skills is through interpersonal activities, such as mock interviews and storytelling. Assign the students to small groups of two or three, and then give them a particular listening activity to accomplish. For example, you may have one student interview another for a job with a company or for an article in a newspaper. Even a storytelling activity, such as one that answers the question "What was your favorite movie from last year?" can give students the opportunity to ask one another questions and then to practice active listening skills⁴.

Group Activities

Larger group activities also serve as a helpful method for teaching listening skills to students. You can begin with a simple group activity. For the first part, divide students into groups of five or larger and instruct them to learn one hobby or interest of at least two other group members. Encourage them to ask clarifying questions during the activity, and you may allow them to take notes if helpful. However, as time passes and their skills grow, you should limit students to only writing notes after the completion of the first part of the group activity. For the second part, have the students sit in a large circle, and then have each individual student share the name and the hobby or interest of the group members that she or he met. This second part of the group activity can also lend itself to additional listening exercises. For example, you may ask students to name a number of the hobbies and interests identified during the sharing session⁵.

Audio Segments

³ Willis, J. Teaching English through English. London, 1998 , p-23

⁴ Yagang, F. Listening: Problems and solutions. Washington, DC, 1994 ,p-27

⁵ Willis, J. Teaching English through English. London, 1998 , p-26

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You can also teach listening skills through audio segments of radio programs, online podcasts, instructional lectures and other audio messages. You should model this interactive listening process in class with your students, and then instruct them to repeat the exercise on their own. First, instruct students to prepare for listening by considering anything that they will want to learn from the content of the audio segment. Once they have written down or shared these ideas, then play the audio segment, allowing the students to take notes if helpful. Once they have gained confidence and experience, repeat this activity but instruct students to not take notes until the completion of the audio segment. You can use shorter or longer audio segments, and you can choose more accessible or more challenging material for this type of exercise.

Video Segments

Another helpful resource for teaching listening skills are video segments, including short sketches, news programs, documentary films, interview segments, and dramatic and comedic material. As with audio segments, select the portion and length of the video segment based on the skill level of your students. With your students, first watch the segment without any sound and discuss it together. Encourage the students to identify what they think will be the content of the segment. Then, watch the segment again, this time with sound, allowing students to take notes if helpful for their skill level. After the completion of the video segment, you can have students write a brief summary of the segment, or you can take time to discuss as a group how the segment compares with the students' expectations⁶.

Instructional Tips

Whatever method you use for teaching listening, keep a few key instructional tips in mind that will help both you and your students navigate the learning process. One, keep your expectations simple, as even the most experienced listener would be unable to completely and accurately recall the entirety of a message. Two, keep your directions accessible and build in opportunities for students not only to ask clarifying questions, but also to make mistakes. Three, help students navigate their communication anxiety by developing activities appropriate to their skill and confidence level, and then strengthen their confidence by celebrating the ways in which they do improve, no matter how small.

Listening-really listening to students is critical to the student/teacher relationship, for knowing their teacher is interested in what they are saying, makes students feel cared about and emotionally connected to school. Since research shows

⁶ Willis, J. Teaching English through English. London, 1998 , p-27

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that feeling connected is requisite to students' motivation to learn, showing that we listen is important not only as a matter of kindness, but also as a motivational strategy⁷.

It is easy to perform routine tasks while listening to students. In fact, at times teachers are evaluated for their multitasking ability; however, unless you appear to be completely focused on the student speaking to you, he is apt think you care neither about what he is saying or him. Consequently, in addition to really listening to students, we must also show we are really listening.

An effective way to demonstrate your attentiveness is to use active listening, a technique extraordinary:

- for gaining self-understanding;
- for improving relationships;
- for making people feel understood;
- for making people feel cared about;
- for the ease with which it is learned.

By using active listening with students, you build the relationship of trust and caring essential to students' motivation to learn. By teaching active listening, you help students overcome poor listening habits such as:

- Turning a speaker off and dwelling on the plethora of internal distractions we all have.

- Letting an early remark of a speaker, with which one disagrees, develop a prejudice which clouds or puts a stop to any further listening.

- Allowing personal characteristics of the speaker or his poor delivery to prevent understanding⁸.

Although some people recommend giving feedback with a statement rather than a question, the objective remains the same--to clarify either the factual and/or emotional content of the message. By refining the listener's interpretation of his statements, the speaker gains greater insight about his own feelings, he may reap benefits of a catharsis, and he knows the listener is really paying attention to him. The listener improves his ability to focus on a speaker and to think about implied meanings.

Although the feedback step is at the heart of active listening, to be effective, each of the following steps must be taken:

- Look at the person, and suspend other things you are doing.
- Listen not merely to the words, but the feeling content.
- Be sincerely interested in what the other person is talking about.
- Restate what the person said.
- Ask clarification questions once in a while.

⁷ <http://www.learnenglishfeelgood.com/eslvideo/> 11.11.2011

⁸ Richards, J.C. (1983). Listening comprehension: Approach, design, procedure. TESOL Quarterly, 17, p-18.

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- Be aware of your own feelings and strong opinions.
- If you have to state your views, say them only after you have listened.

The main conclusion can be based on following suggestion: there is an analogy between native and foreign languages. In the first case a child goes from hearing to speech. In the second case a student does the same thing, where a teacher's speech is the basic condition and factor predetermining these transfer.

Also it has become clear that recognition is possible under several conditions: solid lexical, grammar and pronunciation skills. There is a methodological recommendation that texts for auding tasks should be given only after working with lexical and grammar items⁹.

We also have come up with the conclusion that without correct teacher's actions during a lesson there is no possibility to teach students listening comprehension. And a teacher is the one whose speech is indicative for students from the first moment of learning foreign language. That is a teacher should carefully choose material for a lesson and ways of introducing it.

Listening comprehension has a number of roles to play within a language course, and its importance clearly depends on the aims of the program as a whole. It may only be a minor feature, just to give learners exposure to what English sounds like: alternatively, it may have a major function for someone planning to study in English – speaking country or to interact extensively in the language. Whatever its purpose, we have tried to show in this chapter how views on the learning and teaching of listening have developed from a growing understanding both of the nature of the skill itself, and of the variety and range of language on which it can be practiced.

Listening skills are vital for learners. Of the 'four skills,' listening is by far the most frequently used. Listening and speaking are often taught together, but beginners, especially non-literate ones, should be given more listening than speaking practice. It's important to speak as close to natural speed as possible, although with beginners some slowing is usually necessary. Without reducing our speaking speed, we can make our language easier to comprehend by simplifying your vocabulary, using shorter sentences, and increasing the number and length of pauses in our speech.

The formative impact on the pupil is at present thought to have some influence to bear on the development of short-term and long-term memory. The process of storing a stream of speech into long-term memory seems to be as follows: 1) receiving a message and placing it temporarily in short-term memory; 2) selecting the main idea (the gist or essence) of what was heard and narrowing uncertainty of the initially perceived unit – operational memory; 3) storing the essence in long-term memory.

⁹ Dunkel, P. A. Listening in the native and second language. 2001, p-45

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The learner retains important elements in short-term memory for about ten seconds and then re-adjusts each incoming segment in view of its precedence or anticipation. Recognition of units tapers the choice and creates conditions for taking decisions on oral input that may be insufficient for a complete recognition of meaning. Consequently, the operational memory retains the units of an utterance that is heard only once, and serves an important function in listening comprehension .

To **conclude** we can say that listening is a difficult process with the same measure for a teacher and for a student. The effectiveness of listening depends on several strategies which can help a teacher make his or her lesson productive.

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