

Teaching Listening Comprehension as a Part of Educational Process at School

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses listening comprehension as a part of educational process at school. Listening comprehension is concerned with decoding of a speech, which involves continual mental processing, concentrated attention, and memory. Listening 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.

Introduction. 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.

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 .

Results. 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.

Listening as comprehension is the traditional way of thinking about the nature of listening. Indeed, in most methodology manuals listening and listening comprehension are synonymous. This view of listening is based on the assumption that the main function of listening in second language learning is to facilitate understanding of spoken discourse. We will examine this view of listening in some detail before considering a complementary view of listening – listening as acquisition. This latter view of listening considers how listening can provide input that triggers the further development of second-language proficiency.

To understand the nature of listening processes, we need to consider some of the characteristics of spoken discourse and the special problems they pose for listeners. Spoken discourse has very different characteristics from written discourse, and these differences can add a number of dimensions to our understanding of how we process speech. For example, spoken discourse is usually instantaneous. The listener must process it "online" and there is often no chance to listen to it again. Often, spoken discourse strikes the second-language listener as being very fast, although speech rates vary considerably. Radio monologs may contain 160 words per minute, while conversation can consist of up to 220 words per minute. The impression of faster or slower speech generally results from the amount of intraclausal pausing that speakers make use of. Unlike written discourse, spoken discourse is usually unplanned and often reflects the processes of construction such as hesitations, reduced forms, fillers, and repeats. Spoken discourse has also been described as having a linear structure, compared to a hierarchical structure for written discourse. Whereas the unit of organization of written discourse is the sentence, spoken language is usually delivered one clause at a time, and longer utterances in conversation generally consist of several coordinated clauses. Most of the clauses used are simple conjuncts or adjuncts. Also, spoken texts are often context-dependent and personal, assuming shared background knowledge. Lastly, spoken texts may be spoken with many different accents, from standard or non-standard, regional, non-native, and so on¹.

¹ Jack C. R. Teaching listening and speaking from theory to practice, 2008-48pp.

Listening involves a sender (a person, radio, and television), a message, and a receiver (the listener). Listeners often must process messages as they come, even if they are still processing what they have just heard, without backtracking or looking ahead. In addition, listeners must cope with the sender's choice of vocabulary, structure, and rate of delivery. The complexity of the listening process is magnified in second language contexts, where the receiver also has incomplete control of the language².

Given the importance of listening in language learning and teaching it is essential for language teachers to help their students become effective listeners. In the communicative approach to language teaching, this means modeling listening strategies and providing listening practice in authentic situations: those that learners are likely to encounter when they use the language outside the classroom.

Instructors want to produce students who, even if they do not have complete control of the grammar or an extensive lexicon, can fend for themselves in communication situations. In the case of listening, this means producing students who can use listening strategies to maximize their comprehension of aural input, identify relevant and non-relevant information, and tolerate less than word-by-word comprehension. In Listening classes, students are usually given practice in listening but they are not actually *taught* listening. Practice is not enough.

Conclusion Research and case studies have told us many things about how listening should be taught. But often, this knowledge has not made the jump into classroom practice. While many classes are based on the idea of giving students lots of practice with English, research tells us that we also need to teach listening. In addition to giving students plenty of listening practices. We should also break the skill of listening into micro-skill components and make sure that our students are aware of what they need to know to understand how to listen to English.

Students need to know and understand:

- ✓ how words link together (liaison);
- ✓ how vowels weaken (the central vowel);
- ✓ how sounds mix together (assimilation);
- ✓ how sounds disappear (elision);
- ✓ how syllables disappear (ellipsis);
- ✓ how helping sounds are used between vowel sounds (intrusion);
- ✓ how intonation helps with conversational turn taking (intonation);
- ✓ how stress signals new information (prominence);
- ✓ how to use grammar to help guess meaning (strategies);
- ✓ how to use discourse knowledge to help guess meaning (strategies);
- ✓ how to use knowledge of intonation and stress to guess meaning (strategies).

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² Brown, G. Listening to Spoken English. London, 1992 p226.

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