

Teaching Listening Skill in the Indian Context

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I. INTRODUCTION

Listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process. Listening is a more important skill in learning a new language than speaking, reading and writing. Listening is the foundation of formal education and language acquisition. The learning process of human beings starts with listening. At birth we know nothing about language, yet we successfully acquire the first language. Similarly, the second language also can be acquired by means of acquiring proper listening skills.

Harold E. Palmer believed that the scientific study of language should integrate linguistic pedagogy and psychology. He therefore introduced the order of four language skills. They are: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Of these again, as we have already noted above, Listening is the primary and the most important skill. It is the forerunner of all the language skills. In its absence other skills are of no avail.

In India English is taught as a second language up to the graduation level but the students hardly acquire the basic language skills of English. The primary reason for this state of affairs is that teaching of the English language starts with a highly advanced skill, i.e. writing. When children join school teachers insist on their writing the letters of the alphabet on a slate rather than listen to the sounds of English in the form of songs, stories, conversation, etc. The insistence on writing and to an extent on reading continues all through their academic career. Quite predictably, the young students feel it very difficult to learn the English language to begin with and to end with.

Listening is not the same as hearing. Hearing refers to the sounds that one hears, whereas listening requires more than that: it requires focus. Listening means paying attention to the particular topic, but while we are listening to the particular topic we may hear the sounds from outside such as the noise of vehicle, fans, birds, and so on. Listening means paying attention not only to the topic, but also to how it is articulated, how language and voice are used, and how speaker is using body language.

Types of listening skill

There are five kinds of listening.

1. Discriminative listening
2. Comprehensive listening
3. Critical listening
4. Therapeutic listening
5. Appreciative listening

1. Discriminative Listening: This is the most basic form of listening and it does not involve the understanding of meaning of words or phrases. Instead, the focus is largely on sounds. For example, when a baby is born it listens to all sounds of the surroundings.
2. Comprehensive Listening: Comprehensive listening helps the listener to understand a message. Comprehensive listening plays a vital role in the communication process. For example, listening to a lecture, telephone conversation, public speech, etc.
3. Therapeutic listening: Therapeutic listening does not involve making judgements or offering advice but gently encouraging the speaker to explain and elaborate on their feelings and emotions. In this kind of listening the listener allows somebody to talk through a problem. This kind of listening is very important in building good interpersonal relations. For example, discussing work or current problems with members of family or colleagues.
4. Critical listening: Critical listening is the fourth kind of listening where listeners have to evaluate the message. Listeners have to critically respond to the message and give their opinion or make judgement. For example, listening to an radio/TV advertisement, being interviewed or interviewing somebody.
5. Appreciative listening: The final type of listening is called appreciative listening where the focus is on enjoying what one listens. For example, listening to the songs, broadcasts on the radio, poetry reading, etc.

Thus whatever may be the purpose, effective listening requires cognitive and behavioural interaction. Therefore listening is a creative activity that can be described and analysed.

IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING SKILL IN THE CLASSROOM

Listening is an active process since the mind actively engages in making meaning. Therefore it is the duty of teachers to ensure that the materials they use are comprehensible to the learners, as well as within the range of what they are developmentally ready for. The teacher can support the understanding of children more effectively if he/she directs their attention to specific points that have to be listened to and use activities that actively support their understanding of the spoken text.

Research suggests that we remember between 25% to 50% of what we hear. That means if a teacher teaches for 45 minutes, the students will retain less than half of it. Therefore whatever the topic the teacher teaches it should be interesting, clear and important. It is only then that the students will listen to it, rather than hear it, and retain a substantial part of it.

BARRIERS TO LISTENING

Listening is an important skill in order to gain knowledge. But for some students it is very difficult to acquire this skill. There are many barriers that come in the way and prevent the acquisition of the skill. The main barriers to listening skill in the classroom context are:

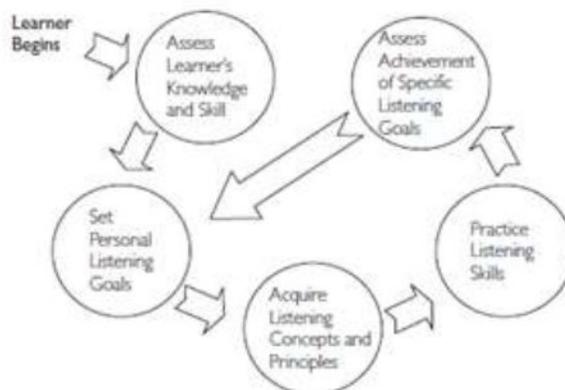
- Inability to understand the teacher because of a different accent or low voice.
- Inability to hear because of background noise.
- Large and uncomfortable classrooms.

- Short attention span.
- Lack of exposure to the language.
- Uninteresting or boring topics.

METHODS TO IMPROVE LISTENING SKILL

As pointed out already many Indian students of English face difficulties in listening and speaking rather than in reading and writing. This is due to the fact that greater emphasis is laid on writing and reading in a language class than on listening and speaking. In India teachers often fail to prepare the students for listening and speaking skills. But by implementing proper methods and techniques of teaching the listening skill in the language classroom they may develop this skills in the students. Some of the methods are suggested below.

- Providing activities such as ‘listen and do,’ picture ordering and information transfer.
- Make the students to listen to what they are interested in. For example, some may be interested in listening to English news, poems, cricket commentary, etc.
- The teacher has to prepare general knowledge in complete statements or true or false statements that the learners will hear and try to answer.
- Before starting a new lesson the teacher has to read the text loudly and ask the students to listen carefully. Often students hear the same story several times which helps them develop fluency in listening.
- Ask the students to do something in response to what they have listened. For example, taking notes, marking pictures or diagrams according to instructions.
- Activating vocabulary before starting a new lesson. This way the learners will draw upon the linguistic resources they already have.
- Create proper atmosphere to learn a new language by providing recorded English lessons and audio stories, etc. This is easily done these days because of the readily available information technology.
- Listening skill should be assessed by the teacher or even by the students themselves. Judy Brownell has suggested the following Listening Assessment Cycle (LAC).



Judy Brownell's Listening Assessment Cycle

CONCLUSION

The importance of the English language is increasing with each passing day. English is a global language as well as a library language and it enables us to connect with the world and to gain knowledge. So in order to gain a reasonable command of the English language systematic efforts have to be made. Listening being the basic skill and starting point in learning the language it should be taught systematically. In this age of information technology it is very easy to use recorded electronic materials such as conversations in different contexts, speeches, group discussions, news broadcasts, short movies and so on in the classroom and give listening practice to the students. Care has to be however taken that these materials are authentic, i.e., the voice in the records should be preferably of an educated native speaker or synthetic voice which approximates native accent. Students should also be encouraged to listen to whatever English materials they have access to, be it radio, T.V or MP3 records. This, coupled with the practice in the classroom, is likely to produce intended outcomes as far as acquisition of the listening skill is concerned.

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