

TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Listening ・ Good Listeners
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Abstract

Listening Comprehension is a critical skill which students need to learn and practice. Clearly, there is more to teaching listening comprehension than playing a CD and asking students to fill in the blanks. Some habits of “good listeners” and how we can apply them in the classroom will be discussed. Finally, a number of useful websites for practicing listening outside of class will be introduced.

Introduction.

We live in a world of sound. In our daily lives, we spend far more time listening than speaking, reading or writing (Morley, 1991). In many language classrooms however, listening comprehension is somehow seen as a lesser skill. We must remind ourselves that “Speaking does not of itself constitute communication unless what is said is comprehended by another person” (Rivers cited in Morley, 1991, p. 82). Surely this shows the importance of listening comprehension, and implies that teachers need to allocate a considerable amount of classroom time to teaching and practicing it. In this paper, I would like to describe some of the habits of ‘good listeners’ and how we can apply these habits in the classroom. I will also suggest some websites that students may use to practice listening outside of the classroom.

Bottom-up and Top-down Listening.

Nunan (1998, p. 25) states that “successful listeners use both bottom-up and top-down strategies”. For an example of top-down processing, consider the following sentence fragment, “When he rang the doorbell....”. On hearing just the first part of the sentence, we automatically start to use our bank of knowledge to think about and to predict what the rest of the sentence might be. In contrast, bottom-up processing involves building meaning from the sounds we hear. We convert the sounds into words, then into grammatical relationships, and upwards until we

arrive at a meaning. When we listen, bottom-up and top-down processes interact and this interaction leads to understanding (Peterson, 1991). Although students automatically use these processes in their first language (L1), they often need to be taught to do so in their second language (L2). There are various ways to approach this in the classroom. If we choose to practice bottom-down processing skills, the students could be asked to listen for detailed information such as prices in a shop, or the departure times at a train station. For top-down processing, we could ask the students to listen for the gist of a conversation. These are only simple examples, but it is important to note that teachers need to take both skills into account when planning lessons.

What's So Important About Pre-Listening Activities ?

The next factor to consider is that “effective ...listeners predict what they are going to hear” (Harmer, 1991, p. 183). Imagine that we wish to listen for departure information in a train station. In our L1, we are well aware of the type of language used in train station announcements. If asked to predict what the station announcer is likely to say, most people would probably come up with a simple sentence pattern such as “the (destination) train departs/leaves from platform number (number) at (time)”. We already have a good idea of what is going to be said and what kind of information we need to listen for. In other words, we have ‘scripts’ for various situations and these scripts play a critical role in helping us to make sense of what we hear (Richards, 1983; Morley, 1991). Students, on the other hand, generally need help in building and activating scripts in their L2 before they are asked to tackle a listening task. Clearly, we can see that pre-listening activities have an important role to play. Richards (1983) argues that the use of pre-listening activities is also an important aid to actually teaching listening comprehension, rather than merely testing it. We can therefore conclude that teachers should always provide some appropriate pre-listening activities which get the students to think about the topic, and help to activate the appropriate script. Furthermore, a skilled teacher could use this pre-listening stage to see what the students already know, and if necessary, to pre-teach the vocabulary or language that the students will need to succeed in the listening task.

Realistic Tasks and Meaningful Listening.

I'd like to explore the idea that “listening exercises are most effective if they are constructed around a task” (Ur, 1984, p. 25). It is easy to argue that when we listen in real life, we usually have a purpose or a reason to listen (Ur, 1984; Morley, 1991). Moreover, we usually do something with what we hear (Harmer, 1991). We can simulate this in the classroom by giving the students realistic tasks which they can do during a listening exercise. Students could be asked to quickly note down a train departure time, the price of a particular item in a shop, or to follow directions on a map. If we really want to teach listening comprehension, then surely we need to prepare the students for the situations that they are likely to encounter in the real world.

By building a listening exercise around a realistic task, we can make the exercise more meaningful and more useful to the students.

Looking at Listening Materials.

We should also look at the type of materials we use to teach listening comprehension. Unfortunately for our students, many textbooks contain stilted, artificial dialogues which have absolutely no resemblance to real speech (Richards, 1983). It seems obvious that students raised on a diet of such materials are likely to have significant problems when they finally encounter real language. Porter and Roberts (1981, p. 179) warn us that “we cannot expect learners to handle types of language they have never, or hardly ever been exposed to”. While it would be nice if we could only use authentic listening materials in the classroom, we need to remember that lower-level students may find such materials difficult, overwhelming, or discouraging. One way to approach this is to use materials which are very close to real English, but take into account some of the weaknesses or problems that learners at that level are likely to have (Richards 1983; Ur, 1984). Alternatively, when we do choose to use authentic listening materials, we can set different tasks to suit the level and changing needs of the students. Nunan (1998) suggests that lower-level students could be asked to identify the number of speakers, to listen for particular words, or to count the number of questions. Higher-level students could be asked to perform more difficult tasks with the same listening materials. We can also use difficult or challenging materials to teach learners listening strategies such as asking for repetition or guessing the meaning of a word from the context (Porter & Roberts, 1981). In particular, we need to remind students that they do not need to understand every word they hear to listen successfully.

In most classrooms, CDs are now replacing tapes as the main way to present listening materials. There are many reasons for this; CDs are cheap, easy to use and can be used to expose the students to a wide range of accents and listening situations. However, there is no reason to limit ourselves to only using recorded materials. Consider for a moment that in most real-life listening situations, we can actually see the person who is speaking. The speaker's body language also provides a myriad of additional hints to help us understand what is being said. Movies or television shows, or even an invited speaker can be used to add spice to the classroom and to make the listening more real for the students. As Ur (1984, p. 25) puts it, “both recorded and live speech should have a place in the classroom”.

Listening On The Internet.

A final factor to consider is the amount of classroom time spent on listening. As classroom time is limited, students should be encouraged to practice listening outside of the class as often as possible. Fortunately, the internet is a rich source of free listening materials for self-study. Many

of the better websites allow the students to choose their own level and topic. Students are able to listen to the materials as many times as they wish and never need to feel embarrassed or reluctant to ask the teacher to play the CD again. Websites such as Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab (<http://www.esl-lab.com>) and English-Trailers (<http://www.english-trailers.com>) are highly recommended.

Conclusion.

I have tried to show that there is much more to teaching listening comprehension than simply playing a CD and asking students to circle some comprehension questions. We need to use appropriate pre-listening activities, as well as a wide range of realistic tasks which can be used to practice both bottom-up and top-down processing skills. We should be very aware of the needs and interests of our students, and plan lessons accordingly. We should use a variety of listening materials in class and we should encourage the students to practice listening in their own time. If we keep all these factors in mind, we will certainly come a great deal closer to giving our students the listening skills they'll need to listen and communicate successfully in the future.

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