

A Review of Listening Skills in Language Learning

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Doi: 10.23918/ijsses.v10i1p56

Abstract: The significance of listening skills lies in the fact that it provides comprehensible input for language acquisition. Through listening, learners encounter new words and grammatical rules, develop their pronunciation and learn how to use the language in real-world context. Language learners need to interact with the speakers of the language. With this in mind, learners try to create meaning from the messages conveyed by the speaker and respond for effective communication. This paper attempts to show the importance of listening skills in language acquisition.

Keywords: Listening Skills, Comprehension, Comprehensible Input, Language Learning

1. Introduction

Underwood (1989) defines listening as "the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear" (p. 1). Mendelsohn (1994) simply defines listening as the ability to understand the spoken language of native speakers. Listening is the most frequently used skill in language learning (Morley, 1999). Both in and out of the classroom, listening is commonly used. At all stages of education, it is used as a primary medium of learning. Listening is an active process which requires language learners to discriminate between vocabulary and grammar structures, interpret intonation and stress and create a meaning. Comprehensible input has a fundamental role in language acquisition and learning does not take place without understanding the input. Listening provides comprehensible input to and learners cannot respond if they fail to comprehend the message. For that reason, "listening is thus fundamental to speaking." (Nunan, 1997, p 47). Also, language is for communication. Without understanding the input, communication cannot be achieved.

Rost (1994) outlines the importance of listening in as: 1. Listening is pivotal in language learning because it provides input for the learners. 2. Learners need to interact with the speakers of language; thus, they need to understand the messages sent by them 3. The use of listening tasks is a useful way to introduce new vocabulary and grammatical structures. In order to sustain communication, it is highly important that

Received: November 24, 2022

Accepted: December 30, 2022

Altun, M. (2023). A Review of Listening Skills in Language Learning. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies*, 10(1), 56-61.

language learners understand and respond; therefore, listening skills cannot be neglected in language learning. This paper attempts to demonstrate the significance of listening skills in language learning.

2. Literature Review

While listening “chiefly served as a means of introducing new grammar through model dialogues” (p. 13) in the early days, since the early 70's, it has become an essential skill in language learning. Pourhosein Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) emphasizes the significance of listening and stress that listening skill plays a crucial role in the process of communication. The importance of listening lies in the fact that it provides comprehensible input for language acquisition. Learners need to benefit from the language input provided by listening tasks for the development of language proficiency. Rost (2001) argues that a major difference between more successful and less successful learners is their ability to use listening in a skillful way.

As it is the most widely used language skill in daily life, listening has a critical role in language learning. It is noteworthy to mention that “an estimated 80% of what we know is acquired through listening” (Swaine, Friehe, & Harrington, 2004, p. 48). It would be a better idea to define listening. It has been defined by Glikjani and Sabouri (2016) as “a process of receiving what the speaker says, making and showing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and answering, and creating meaning by participation, creativity, and empathy” (p. 124). Learners need to understand, evaluate and analyze the messages; for that reason, listening involves some processes. It is apparent that the central idea in listening is to create meaning from the utterances produced by the speaker. During this process listeners endeavor to make meaning from they receive and respond to the messages.

Compared with other skills, listening has its own demands and features. Field (2007) states that “listening is a rather more demanding skill than reading” (p.27). We do not see blank spaces between words in reading. Learners have an opportunity to check overall understanding which cannot be done in listening. Similarly, listening involves stress, intonation, and loudness which do not exist in written language. These features suggest that listening is quite different than the other language skills. However, Perego and Boyle (2013) stress that listening, speaking, reading and writing mutually support each other during development and any practice contributes to the overall development of the other.

Listening is an active and dynamic process. Underwood (1989) argues that “whilst hearing can be thought of as a passive condition, listening is always an active process” (p.2). Listener is in an active process in which he/she tries to interpret information and in order to understand the message of the speaker. For that reason, Lynch and Mendelsohn (2010) state that “active listening is also an interpretive process” (p.180). The difference between hearing and listening is explained by Rost (2002) as “hearing is a form of perception. Listening is an active and intentional process. Although both hearing and listening involve sound perception, the difference in terms reflects a degree of intention” (p. 8). During listening the listeners try to attach meaning to the sound.

Listening comprehension is an essential part of communication and it “takes place within the mind of the listener, and the context of interpretation is the cognitive environment of the listener” (Buck, 2001, p.29). According to Hamouda (2013) listening comprehension is an interactive process between the speaker and the listener and the speaker in which the listener tries to construct meaning from the oral input. With this

in mind, it is noteworthy to mention that listening comprehension aids learners to promote linguistic knowledge for the mastery of the language. It involves learners to decode input and establish meaning from spoken words. As learners hear, they try to derive meaning by calling on their prior knowledge and guessing unfamiliar words to create meaning (Lund, 1991). Listening comprehension is a complex process and rather than simply decoding messages, it is an active process between the speaker and the listener. Simply put, listening comprehension is an interactive process in which listeners perform a number of strategies to construct meaning with the help of their own existing knowledge and clues from contextual information (Osada, 2001).

Learners' listening comprehension can be hindered by some reasons. It is not easy for some language learners to understand the spoken messages because they "need to integrate information from a range of sources such as phonetic, phonological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic" (Osada, 2004, pp. 55-56). Speed of delivery is one of the major problems that impedes listening comprehension. Learners fail to receive the messages sent by the speaker if the speech is delivered at a fast speed. Similarly, vocabulary knowledge plays a huge role on listening performance. Field (2003) stresses the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension. An unknown word learners encounter can result in missing the next part of the speech. Also, if learners do not have an idea about the topic, they might not understand the messages conveyed. Therefore, contextual knowledge holds an important place in listening comprehension. Ur (2007) lists some of the major problems language learners face while listening as "hearing sounds, understanding intonation and stress, coping with redundancy and noise, predicting, understanding colloquial vocabulary, fatigue, understanding different accents, using visual and aural environmental clues" (pp. 11-20). Generally, the problems language learners experience during listening activities can be summarized as: unfamiliar vocabulary, accent of the speakers, the speed and length of listening. Also, cultural knowledge is another factor that hinders comprehension of listening tasks. Providing some background knowledge before the listening activity will help learners better comprehension of the listening materials.

Listening comprehension has been considered as a critical language skill for the development of fluency and accuracy. Moreover, it is essential to promote other language skills (Vandergrift, 2007). Peterson (2001) states that "no other type of language input is easy to process as spoken language, received through listening ... through listening, learners can build an awareness of the interworkings of language systems at various levels and thus establish a base for more fluent productive skills" (p. 87). Without understanding the input, learning cannot begin. Listening comprehension is an active and cognitive process; for that reason, it requires exposure, practice, and the implementation of some strategies (Rost, 2007).

Language learners employ some strategies to comprehend the messages conveyed through listening. Cognitive strategies "interact with text information directly through recall, identification, analysis and response in order to comprehend a given text" (Kyoko, 2002, p. 68). These strategies are related to gathering data and problem-solving techniques language learners use to acquire knowledge and skill. Furthermore, cognitive strategies allow learners to facilitate the learning of language (Bingol et al., 2014). In addition to cognitive operation, the interactivity of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge is also needed for listening. While linguistic knowledge encompasses vocabulary, semantics, syntax, discourse and phonology, non-linguistic knowledge entails context and topic. Metacognitive strategies are

“conscious strategies that relate to listeners’ awareness of how to regulate, plan and monitor their cognition, and learner’s ability to evaluate their comprehension” (Kyoko, 2002, p. 68). Metacognition has underlying potential to strengthen the awareness of learner abilities.

Learners learn how to monitor, plan and evaluate the gathered information. The use of this strategy enables learners to learn faster and apply the knowledge easily. Therefore, it provides clear advantages for learners to understand the nature of listening (Mart, 2021). When learners are not metacognitively engaged they cannot apply their skills and knowledge to meet the cognitive demands of listening tasks; thus, they cannot build confidence to develop their listening performance. Simply put, metacognitive strategies promote motivation and self-confidence of learners to perform the tasks skillfully. Socio-affective strategies are “the techniques listeners use to collaborate with others, to verify understanding or to lower anxiety” (Vandergrift, 2003). Learners need to control their emotions, motivations, attitudes towards learning. This regulation will allow them to interact with others. At the same time, these strategies help learners with checking their comprehension and reducing their apprehension. Learners need to reduce their anxiety and feel confident for interaction with others. Socio-affective strategies are significant for language learners because the learning situation and social-psychological factors of learners are linked to each other.

These strategies will facilitate listening comprehension and help learners have a native-like skill. Listening is a skill which should be developed to master the language. Although listening is a complex skill and deciphering the spoken language is challenging for language learners, increasing the amount of listening time and developing conscious listening strategies will greatly contribute to the development of their listening performance.

3. Conclusion

Listening comprehension is an active process of understanding and making sense of spoken language. Listeners through using previous knowledge, sound discrimination, grammatical structures, linguistic and non-linguistic clues endeavor to understand the oral input. The use of listening strategies is important in that they will facilitate the learning process. While cognitive strategies are related to problem-solving techniques learners use for language acquisition with the help of the gathered data, metacognitive strategies help learners to control their learning by means of planning, monitoring and evaluating. And socio-affective strategies help learners to reduce their anxiety and develop their self-confidence to interact with others.

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