

The Importance of Listening Skill in Language Acquisition- The Problems Experienced & Strategies Adopted in Teaching Listening Skill

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Abstract - Listening, the very basic language skill is the root for developing the other skills like Speaking, Reading and Writing. Yet, it is often overlooked in the present curriculum of schools and colleges. Till the end of 19th Century, written communication was playing a predominant role in language learning but from the beginning of the twentieth century listening started gaining its importance in language teaching. The various challenges towards teaching the skill of listening are now better understood by the language teachers because of the adoption of new strategies which aim for effective listening. Still, the assessment of their listening skills, remain far behind the current views of listening and hence innovations have to be made to renovate imparting the skill of listening.

It is obvious that the skill of listening helps the students to be the best with their studies. The students who are good at listening learn better and faster and have sounder judgments about what is listened to. It helps them to acquire detailed comprehension. Listening and vocabulary are interrelated. These two skills are the most important communication skills in the process of learning.

This paper deals with acquiring the skill of listening, the basic difference between listening and hearing, different types of listening, its importance in language acquisition, what hinders one from being an active listener, various process of listening and at length discusses the adoption of newly invented strategies for developing the skill of listening.

Index Terms - Listening, overlooked, enhancing Language skills, curriculum, predominant, innovations, hinders, Teaching skills and Language Acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

The four essential skills that one has to master oneself for learning any language are Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW). It is explicit from the order itself how important the “Listening skill” is. Since it is the skill which helps to receive language input. According to Pourhosein Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), listening skill plays a significant role in the process of communication. According to Krashen, Terrell, Ehrman, and Herzog (1984) acquisition happens only when learners have sufficient comprehensible input. It is obvious that learning cannot take place if there is no input. Hasan (2000) and Hamouda (2013) expressed that active listening provides the appropriate situations for the acquisition and expansion of other language skills i.e., Speaking, Reading and Writing. It is the skill of listening which differentiates a good learner from an average and a poor. The foremost difference between more successful and less successful learners lies in their ability of utilizing listening skill as a tool for learning. The students who are good at listening skill catch the points better and swifter.

Listening is the skill which is quite frequently used skill in any language classrooms. Hence, it is crystal clear that listening is very important for students for it is being used as an avenue for learning at all phases of studies. The general problem of any student is to comprehend what they are listening to and to offer immediate responses orally. Hence there arises a necessity for an integration of listening and speaking. For during the process of learning, the learners’ main consideration is not only learning the grammar of any language but also to interact with others in the same language. Therefore, the two skills ought to be developed simultaneously.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEARING AND LISTENING

Though seem to be similar, the two terms are entirely different. One can acquire knowledge by listening not merely by hearing. Listening is the better version of hearing. Hearing is nothing but mere a sound just getting into our ears. It is one of the physical processes that occur normally. But the skill of listening needs more than that. For good listening, focus and concentrated effort, both mental and physical are needed. Having an idea about the difference between hearings and listening is a paramount aspect for learning and teaching the skill of listening effectively. The two actions can very well be differentiated as follows “Hearing is mere reception of sound, whereas listening is the attachment of meaning to the sound. Hearing is a passive act and listening is active”. Mere hearing will not help to acquire knowledge. So, hearing accompanied with effort to attach meaning to the sound enhances one’s learning skill.

Despite the fact that the two - hearing and listening - engross sound perception, the difference in terms reflects a degree of intention on the side of the listener. Every human being is born with the caliber of hearing. The newly born babies first listen to the distinct sound and then start speaking. In due course, they begin to speak before acquiring the skill of reading, and finally acquire writing skill. That is, among all the other language skills, listening is the first one to appear (Lundsteen, 1979). When a listener takes part actively in the process of listening linguistically and uses his/her non-linguistic knowledge to follow up the message that the speaker intends in a conversation, if she/he listens, replies, and asks/answers questions, it is active listening (Lindsay & Knight, 2006, Littlewood, 1981).

TYPES OF LISTENING

Based on objective and manner in which the Listener takes and respond to the process of Listening, it is classified into the following types.

Discriminative Listening

This type of listening is the most basic type of listening whereby the difference between different sounds is identified. It is a type of listening where the listener differentiates between the two sounds produced even

though he/she does not understand the meaning of the phrases or words. We, in the beginning itself, learn to differentiate between sounds within our own language, but we are not able to differentiate between the phonemes of other languages. That is why everyone feels difficult to learn other languages perfectly.

Comprehensive Listening

In this type of listening, a listener listens to different sounds and comprehends the meaning of each and every sound. This kind of listening is a little advanced listening skill when compared to the previous one. The most basic element of this type of listening is that the listener should have the knowledge of a wide range of vocabulary, grammar rules and syntax in order to make sense of what others say. This type of listening is also called as Content Listening, Informative Listening and Full Listening.

Critical Listening

Critical / Analytical Listening is a type of listening which is made to evaluate a message for the purpose of either agreeing or denying it. In this type of listening, a listener not only listens to the words uttered, but also critically analyzes in his mind what is being uttered by others. It is a kind of active type of listening. It is good and essential where the process of Teaching-Learning takes place.

Biased Listening

This type of listening takes place when a person listens to others with a biased mind. Here one is ready to listen only what he/she thinks worth listening. All the words heard are not recorded in the minds of the listener. The listener will be biased to some matter. This biased listening is often very evaluative in nature.

Appreciative Listening

In appreciative listening, we keenly listen to certain information which is appreciable. We use appreciative listening when we are listening to good music, poetry or maybe even the inspiring words of great leaders. The very purpose of this type of listening is to encourage the speaker to speak more and receive more information. A good example of appreciative listening is when listening to a piece of good music or poetry.

Sympathetic Listening

In this type of listening, listening is made with concern for the well-being of other persons. We care about them and show this concern by paying close attention to them even though they may or may not be deeply connected with us.

Empathic Listening

Empathic listening is also called as therapeutic listening. This type of listening is made to offer emotional support to the speaker, just like a psychiatrist listens to a patient or when we lend a sympathetic ear to a grieving friend. The listener focuses on understanding and identifying with a person's situation, feelings, or motives. There is an attempt to understand what the other person is feeling. The listener does not need to agree or feel the same way with the speaker; instead understand the type and intensity of feelings the speaker is experiencing without judgment.

Dialogic Listening

In this type of listening, learning is made by listening through conversation and an engaged interchange of ideas and information in which one actively seeks to learn more about other persons and how they think.

Relationship Listening

This kind of listening is made in order to develop, sustain or strengthen our relationship with others. This is why we can see lovers talking for hours and attend closely to what each other has to say. Parents patiently listen to any grievance of their wards. Relationship listening plays a vital role in the areas such as negotiation and sales, where it is helpful if the other person likes you and trusts you.

Active Listening

Active listening is an important type of listening which encourages the speaker to keep on speaking. The listener shall be able to ask questions which will encourage the speaker to proceed and share with more information. The classroom listening will be of this kind where we can find more interaction between students and teachers.

Inactive Listening

This is quite opposite to Active listening. In this type of listening, the listener is completely disinterested and as such turns a deaf ear to what the speaker says.

The listener's involvement is almost nil. The listener would simply pretend to listen.

Casual Listening

In this type of listening, the listener pays a little attention to the speaker. This type of listening takes place when a person is compelled to listen to something. Listening is done without obviously showing any attention. However, the percentage of attention shall vary from person to person.

Partial Listening

This type of listening takes place when the listener is physically present, but mentally absent. The listener will be engaged in day-dreaming or thinking of a response. People with a highly creative mind are found to be involved in partial listening most of the time.

Reflective Listening

This type of listening takes place when one listens as well as reflects on the thoughts and ideas conveyed by the speaker. Listening, then reflecting back to the speaker what he/she has said.

Deep Listening

This type of listening occurs when the listener not only listens to what is being said but also reads in between the lines of what is being said. That means the listener understands the meaning, emotions, and beliefs of the speaker. This is yet another good sign of listening.

BARRIERS TO LISTENING

Though the act of Listening seems to be easy, it is a difficult skill to master. Since there are a number of factors that pose a big problem for effective listening. These factors are.

1. **Physiological Barriers:** There are some people who are physically challenged. They may have the problem of hearing impaired that prevents them from listening.
2. **Physical Barriers:** These referred to distraction in the environment such as the sound of Classroom doors slamming in the wind, cell phones ringing, students having conversations outside the hall are the some examples physical barriers.
3. **Attitudinal Barriers:** When we have a lot on our minds, we shall fail to listen to what is being said as our mind is crowded with many thoughts. This

is particularly true when we feel stressed or worried about any issue. Another common attitudinal barrier is egocentrism, or the belief that he/she is more knowledgeable than the speaker, or that there is nothing new to learn from the speaker. People with this kind of close-minded attitude are very poor listeners. They would wantonly avoid listening.

4. **Cultural Barriers:** Different accents can be barriers to listening. Since they interfere with the ability to understand the meaning of words that are pronounced differently. For example, in a country like India where there is enormous cultural diversity, accents may differ amidst the people of regional states.
5. **Gender Barriers:** Communication research has proved that gender can be barrier to listening. Studies have revealed that listening differs from men to women. Women are more likely to listen for the emotion behind a speaker's words; whereas men listen more for the facts and the content not the emotion. They least bother about the emotions of the speaker.
6. **Lack of Training:** We are not endowed with the skill of listening at the time of birth itself. This skill is developed in course of time through practice and training. Lack of training in listening skills is an important barrier.
7. **Previous experiences:** We are all influenced by previous experiences in life. We normally respond to people based on personal appearances, or previous interpersonal encounters. When we meet with a stereotype person, it is quite natural for us not to show any interest in listening to such monotonous speech.
8. **Listening to multiple conversations at a time:** It is not at all possible to listen to more than one conversation at a time. This will result in poor understanding or misunderstanding. For example, watching television while attempting to listen to somebody's talk. Neither will be successful.

IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

It is needless to stress the importance of listening skill, for the order itself-LSRW- shows the vitality of this skill. It is, indeed, the gate way for developing all the other skills. Lundsteen (1979) expresses that listening is the premier skill to appear. He continued that child

listen to sound before they speak. Therefore, the significance of listening cannot be ignored. Especially in learning any language, listening plays a pivotal role, as it helps the learners to acquire pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary, and syntax and the comprehension of messages conveyed can be based solely on tone of voice, pitch and accent; and all these things are feasible only when we listen.

According to Rost (1994) and Ziane (2011), listening is imperative because it is the major process through which we get all inputs and without possessing that skill, learning cannot occur. Doff (1995) and Ziane (2011) say that listening has a significant effect on developing speaking. The two skills complement each other. Besides, listening precedes speaking skill and without one the other is not at all possible. Emphasizing the importance of listening, Anderson and Lynch (2003) state that listening skills are as important as speaking skills because people cannot communicate face-to-face unless both types of skills are developed together. Listening skills are also important for learning purposes since through listening students receive information and gain insights (Wallace, Stariha & Walberg, 2004).

Listening plays a major role in communication in people's daily lives. As Guo and Wills (2006) state "it is the medium through which people gain a large proportion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and human affairs, their ideals, sense of values". According to Mendelson (1994) "of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50 %; speaking 25-30 %; reading 11-16 %; and writing about 9 %". While emphasizing the importance of listening in language learning, Peterson (2001) states that "no other type of language input is easy to process as spoken language, received through listening." When listening is made, a lot of factors should be specifically paid attention. They are context, facial expressions, and body gestures that are very important for the listeners to facilitate the understanding of what is conveyed by speakers (Ziane, 2011).

THE PROCESS OF LISTENING

During the process of listening, people experience several stages. Top-down Listening and Bottom-up Listening are the two processes that are commonly practiced.

Top-down Listening:

Top-down processing has to do with how we use our background knowledge of the world (known as schema) to understand a text. Instead of depending on understanding individual letters, words, sentences or sounds, the listener uses information and knowledge that might come from outside the text. From our knowledge of situations, contexts, texts, conversations, phrases and sentences, we do understand what we hear. Here the learners comprehend the meaning by considering previous knowledge and schemata.

Bottom-up Listening:

This means making as much use as we can of the low-level clues. We start by listening for the individual sounds and then join these sounds together to make syllables and words. According to Brown, bottom-up processing refers to the process of using the information we have about sounds, word meanings, and discourse markers like first, then and after that to assemble our comprehension of what we read or hear one step at a time. According to Tsui and Full love (1998), Top-down processing is more used by skilled listeners while less-skilled listeners use Bottom-up processing. Cahyono and Widiati (2009) state that successful listeners are those who are capable of adopting both Bottom-up and Top-down processing by merging the new information and the previous knowledge that they have already got. But at the same time, the two types of listening can also be practiced discretely, as the skills involved are quite different.

HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE LISTENER

The following tips will help one to be a active listener and thereby a good learner.

1. Maintaining eye contact with the Speaker

Eye contact is the basic thing for effective communication. When we converse, we are supposed to look each other in the eye. Listening will be marred if we do not look at the speaker. The speaker will also lose his/her enthusiasm in conveying the message when we do not look at them. Generally, People who maintain eye contact are seen as reliable, warm, sociable, honest, confident, and active. Shyness, uncertainty, shame, guilt, or other emotion can hinder eye contact in some people under some circumstances. Be least bother about them.

2. Be attentive

Looking at the Speaker alone will not hold well, we have to be more attentive. It does not mean that we should be always starring at the speaker. We can take away our look now and then but keep attentive. Some would be physically present, but mentally absent. Do not be distracted by your own thoughts, feelings, or biases.

3 Keep an open mind

Listen without judging the speaker or mentally criticizing what is being said. We should keep on listening without jumping into any abrupt conclusions. Enough patience is required for clear understanding.

4 Listen to the words and try to picturise what is being said

We should allow our mind to create a mental model of the information that is being communicated. Whether a literal picture, or an arrangement of abstract concepts, our brain will do the necessary work if we stay focused, with all the senses fully alert.

5 Don't interrupt and do not impose your "solutions"

When listening to someone talk about a problem, we should neither interrupt nor suggesting solutions. Most people dislike advice offered by others. We should not try to offer solutions unless it is demanded.

6 Wait for the speaker to pause to ask clarifying questions

We should allow the speaker to complete his or her speech fully. We should not try to intervene in the middle. Any kind of interruption will disturb the speaker. Avoid guessing or assuming where his or her thoughts are going— this will create a negative impact on effective communication.

7 Ask questions only to ensure understanding

One way to show we are listening and make sure we have heard correctly is to ask specific questions about what is being said. This provides clarification, ensures understanding and shows that we keenly listening.

8 Give the speaker regular feedback

The idea behind asking for feedback is to ensure that the message delivered has fully and properly reached the listener. Positive feedbacks will boost up the speaker to come up with some more points. Similarly, any negative feedback will help the speaker to find out where he/she errors. The feedback can even in the form of physical gestures like a nod from the listeners.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it has been observed that without possessing the skill of listening, there shall be no chance for learning any language. Developing adequate listening skills is an important tool for language acquisition and language teachers should utilize this to guide their students in attaining language proficiency. Moreover, listening is mandatory not only for learning any language but also for learning other subjects. Hence undue care has to be taken for enhancing one's listening skill. But many learners still find it a hard nut to crack. It is due to the fact that this skill is almost sidelined in the curriculum of schools and colleges. Normally, in language teaching, speaking is given with primary importance; whereas less importance is attached with listening skill although it is known that oral skills and aural skills cannot be separated from each other. So, the need of the hour is to find out some ways and means to develop this skill amidst students. The teachers in particular the language teachers shall adopt a variety of techniques to help students learn good listening skills and acquire grammar and vocabulary needed at their level. Besides, suitable teaching in listening comprehension can decrease listening apprehension and provide a good basis for becoming independent learners. Finally, it can be concluded that by equipping the learners in the skill of listening, we help them to enrich their knowledge by which they can be successful learners.

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