

On the Teaching of English Listening

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Abstract—Language is a socializing tool. The fundamental purpose of English teaching is training the students to put English into practical social use. As the most common medium to acquire knowledge and develop a sensation for a language, accurate listening, is mandatory before accurate speaking. Only when the listener has listened to the instruction correctly, could the listener do according to the instruction; this demonstrates the social function of language.

Index Terms—English listening, skill improvement, listening teaching

Other than being a socializing skill, listening is also the basis of improving other language skills. However, as observed in our teaching experiences, students commonly do well in written-exams, but face much difficulty in listening-exams. When learning English, listening is what students struggle the most. There hence, improving the students' listening skills, for them to be capable in basic English communication, has become a problem we need to deal with efforts. Now I will discuss several approaches and experiences regarding helping students to improve listening skills.

I. ENHANCE EDUCATION IN FUNDAMENTS OF LANGUAGE. HELP STUDENTS TO OVERCOME LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY BARRIERS.

Listening skill is a synthesis of listening and comprehension. Comprehension is a process which one makes use of various knowledge and skills. During the process of listening, what determines the efficiency of comprehension is the level of knowledge the student possesses in the language. That is the reason in teaching, I emphasize the training of phonetics, and ensure the students to learn the international phonetic transcriptions. Also, skills I have intentionally instructed to the students include spelling-rules, stresses when pronouncing words, stresses when pronouncing sentences, etc. Disciplinarily training the students' pronunciation, especially patterns in long and short, for example, fifty[ˈfifti]—fifteen[ˈfif ti:n], mouth[mau θ] — mouths [mau θ z], house[hauz] — houses[hauziz].: meet you[mi:t ju:] — [mi:t u:], did you [did ju:]—[did u:], a look at it [teik luk t it], Wednesday [ˈwenzdi] climb [claim], blackboard [ˈbl kb], etc.

Memorizing and building a pool of vocabulary is indispensable to the learning of any new language. The most advantageous attribute of English vocabularies is that the spelling and pronunciation of words are generally in match. If students have overcome the oral barrier through training, and are able to accurately read the phonetic transcriptions, they should be able to speak and spell accurately of what they could read. Therefore, while teaching new vocabularies, I often inform the students with pronunciation patterns or knowledge of phonetics, and then help them to categorize with vocabularies which they have previously learned; additionally, I point out the pronunciation patterns, while requiring the students to pronounce accurately and memorize firmly by the rules of spelling and pronunciation. This is an important approach helping the students to overcome barriers in oral English and vocabularies, and acting as a driving force for students to improve listening skills and get a grasp on the language.

II. CREATING A POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN ENGLISH CLASS AND HELPING STUDENTS TO ADAPT TO HABITS OF LISTENING.

First of all, in class, I try to conduct the majority of the lectures in English, for the students to receive as many opportunities of exposing to English as possible. Direct stimulus from the language helps the students to listen more attentively and nurtures their sensitivity and imagination to the language; in the meantime, it is convenient for me to get an idea of whether they have understood the lecture from their responses by eye contact.

Secondly, when introducing or practicing a new exercise, I ask the students to listen carefully and pay attention to pronunciations. For instance, before getting into new materials, I recommend the students to close the textbook and listen to the instructor put in picture of the background and story relevant to the passage or text, using English. Next, they will listen to a voice-recording of the text and answer questions from what they have listened; and they will listen to it again after they read the text. This helps them to develop a positive listening habit.

In addition, the amount of new content taught in every class session may be reduced, and alternatively the instructor may set-up a “free talk” session or spends time discussing a previous topic, during the 5 minutes before lecture begins. As an example, after completing unit 6 of volume I, the students may take turns by their seating order and present a talk

in topics such as class participation, study and activities, personal hobbies and family conditions; sometimes the instructor may tell stories and read poems in English, or asks the students to perform a simple piece of drama. Instructor could also ask a student to tell a story in English, and from the story's content raise a question or two for the classroom; this guarantees that the listeners stay in focus in order to answer the questions. The approach is a training of both speaking skill and listening skill, with the speaker actively leading the listeners to follow

Overall speaking, through creating a positive learning environment, for students to adapt to a positive listening habit, the instructor may train and improve the students' sensitivity, imagination, focus on English and their ability to think in English. The improvements of these skills are doubtlessly positive to the students' overall improvement.

III. MAKING USE OF LISTENING-PRACTICE MATERIALS

One of the most distinguished qualities of the "New Goal" textbooks is that they do not include exercises of pronunciation, tone, stresses, into syllables, stresses and pauses in sentences. However, beginning from volume I, I have scheduled listening practices in every unit and intended to incorporate important phonetic rules such as the 48 phonetic symbols, stresses, repetitive reading of words, stressed reading, pauses and tones in sentences into in-class exercises. In teaching of English-listening, sufficiently making use of these exercise materials and investigating a new system of listening skill training is crucial to the improvement of the students' level of comprehension by listening.

I believe listening-classes should not follow a simple routine of "instructor put on recording---students listen---going over answers", instead, they should be a integrated process of skill-improvement and a unity of explanation and assessment, and combination of speaking, reading and writing. For the listening exercise of every unit, I often guide the students to listen with questions, which help them to keep a clear purpose in mind and to listen more attentively. For example, when I give a lecture on unit 9 in the grade 7 textbook, I start by telling them that this is a weather forecast, since the students have already become familiar with weather vocabularies such as rainy, sunny, windy, cloudy, foggy, snowy, stormy and etc; they have also learned the format of a weather forecast speech and its sentence structures; the weather forecast lecture should be easier for them to follow. Then, I would raise questions like "How is the weather there?" "what are the temperatures of these cities." After listening to the reading once, they will read the questions from their textbook and then listen for one more time; after that, they will fill the answers into the blank. The recording will be put on for a third time, for the students to check their answers and I will go over specific rules of pronunciation and grammar. The process helps the students to tackle oral and grammatical difficulties and to develop understanding on the theme or the overall content. Lastly, the students will listen to the recording again, in the meantime reading it from text and writing it down. Writing-while-listening is an effective exercise to train listening skills, spelling skills and knowledge of grammar rules. Thus, the unity of listening, reading and writing allow the students to figure out the solution through listening. In the meantime of getting a solution and learning new knowledge, they have developed a sense of the language and improved their listening skill gradually.

IV. FOCUS ON TRAINING THE STUDENTS TO ADAPT LISTENING TECHNIQUES AND MAKE THEIR LISTENING MORE EFFICIENT.

It is only possible to make listening more efficient, if the students have a grasp on the listening techniques. In teaching, I sufficiently exploit the listening-training materials that are in the same package with the textbooks, and conduct the training along with the curriculum. The emphasises of my teaching include guidance and training of listening techniques, in order for the students to become familiar with common phonetic patterns, and also importantly comprehension techniques (reviewing, predicting and filtering the content acquired by listening). The training also includes fast-reading of exercise questions, and catching as much information given by the question as possible. For example, a question asks to choose the word appeared in a recording (Xiaoming is eating a pear.) from a set of four pictures. It is facile to recognize the names of these pictures [A) bear, B) pear, C) hair] have the common pronunciation ([æ]); the key to solving the problem is seeing the difference of the consonants [b], [p], [h], and paying attention to the consonant said in the recording, in which B) is the correct answer. For another example, to answer listening comprehension questions from a dialogue or reading of a short prose, it is advisable to go over the questions before the recording begins and focus on the "who, what, where, why, when, how" and other problems asked by the question.

Dialogue questions often involve details such as numerals, calculation, place, setting, occupation, relationship, affirmation and denial. Forms of the question may include making out the meaning of a word from the text, the distinct functions of the language in different circumstances and understanding the connotation of a speech from the level of the entire dialogue. For instance, if all the four choices in a question appear to be names of places, one should pay attention to places mentioned in the dialogue.

Short prose questions require students to make predictions from the content, to locate the thesis statement and to catch key words; listening word by word is not recommended, since this would hinder the students' understanding of the text as a whole. The thesis statement is often placed in the beginning or end of a paragraph. The thesis statement acts as a guide to the contents followed and reveals the main idea of the paragraph; it determines the direction which the writing will move forward. Locating the thesis statement makes it easy to determine the theme of a passage; from here, it is possible to make accurate prediction of the text. Catching the key words refers to paying attention to the concrete

vocabularies (nouns, verbs, numbers, adjectives and averbs) and words expressing time, space, giving examples, comparing, contrasting, with extended or curved meanings, words making a deduction and conjugating words reflecting a logical connection, such as “so, but, however,” for example.

Furthermore, the training also helps the students to develop sequential memorization abilities and learning to take English-listening notes. For example, when recording numbers, students may use Arabic numerals; names, places, dates, time, age and prices heard from the recording could be recorded in a concise manner; places and names could be abbreviated; unfamiliar vocabularies could be recorded by their pronunciations.

In general, training the students to become capable of summarizing, recognizing the main idea, sequential memorization, quick thinking and using imagination upgrades their analytical, summarizing and other integrated abilities; this helps to make their listening more effective, and is crucial to the improvement of their listening skills.

V. HELPING THE STUDENTS TO DEVELOP A CONFIDENT MIND

Good listening skill is mandatory to mastering the English language, but with out doubt to listen, in the meantime to understand is difficult in some extent; this is the reason that in teaching it is important to educate the students to study with a purpose, encourage them to develop confidence and give them the courage to overcome barriers. To study English with a long term plan, such as constantly improving the studying methods, studying the basics of English including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and language habits, listening intensively to recordings and intensive oral practice all require a firm determination. In addition, the instructor should set an active and harmonious atmosphere in the classroom and make efforts to reduce the psychological learning barriers born from fear, concerns and resentment; this could be done by promoting a competition system in the classroom, inspiring the interests of students and giving rewards to students who have made improvement; for example, a teaching session may adopt the form of competing responses; in other words, whoever respond to the question the quickest and give the correct answer will receive rewards. The above teaching approach boosts the student’s desire to listen and maintain a positive attitude of listening, which are vital to improvement of their listening skills.

VI. PAYING MORE ATTENTION TO AFTER-CLASS LISTENING PRACTICE

Listening, speaking, reading and writing are four basic skills of language learning. You can not say that you have mastered the language without any one of them. Of the four skills, listening, one of the means of communication, is used most widely in people’s daily lives. In linguistics, giving the students a lot of listening activities is a good way of improving comprehension of listening. Prepare the listening material into 3 stages: primary stage, intermediate stage and advanced stage.

A. *Primary Stage*

This stage belongs to the foundation stage. For those who are not so good at listening, they can go on training from the following aspects: consistent listening to the sentence pattern drilling exercises and short stories, simple materials on Great Britain and American history or geography, etc.

B. *Intermediate Stage*

Students who stay at the middle level of English listening, carry out the following training: listening to special VOA or BBC. These two programs are relatively slow in pace. At the beginning one can choose to listen to special BBC or VOA and then transit to standard VOA or BBC progressively.

C. *Advanced Stage*

At this stage, the listeners should reach or be close to the listening level of the natives and can deal with various situations. For example, listen to foreign accents, academic discussion, reports of literature, history, politics and economy etc. There are some important factors to take into consideration when listening, some things that characterizes it in most situations according to Penny Ur are: we listen for a purpose and with certain expectations. We make an immediate response to what we hear. There are some visual or environmental clues as to the meaning of what is heard.

VII. TIPS FOR BEING A GOOD LISTENER

1. Give your full attention on the person who is speaking. Don’t look out the window or at what else is going on in the room.
2. make sure your mind is focused, too. It can be easy to let your mind wander if you think you know what the person is going to say next, but you might be wrong! If you feel your mind wandering, change the position of your body and try to concentrate on the speaker’s words.
3. let the speaker finish before you begin to talk. Speakers having the chance to say everything would like to say without being interrupted. When you interrupt, it looks like you aren’t listening, even if you really are.
4. Let yourself finish listening before you begin to speak! You can’t really listen if you are busy thinking about what you want say next.

5. Listen for main ideas. The main ideas are the most important points the speaker wants to get across. They may be mentioned at the start or end of a talk, and repeat a number of times. Pay special attention to statements that begin with phrases such as “my point is” or “the thing to remember is...”.

6. Ask questions. If you are not sure you understand what the speaker has said, just ask. It is a good idea to repeat in your own words what the speaker said so that you can be sure your understanding is correct. For example, you might say, “when you said that no two zebras are alike, did you mean that the stripes are different on each one?”

7. Give feedback. Sit up straight and look directly at the speaker. Now and then, nod to show that you understand. At appropriate points you may also smile, frown, laugh, or be silent. These are all ways to let the speaker know that you are really listening. Remember, you listen with your face as well as your ears.

Putting the above into a net-shell, listening skill covers the listener’s basic knowledge in English and his or her ability to understand. The level of student’s listening skill is not only relevant to the student’s familiarity with knowledge, but also depends on the student’s mind or attitude, ability to make distinctions, ability to understand and other factors. There are multiple aspects to improving a student’s listening skill; in daily teaching, if we focus on the training of listening, speaking and reading, consistently develop techniques that enrich their knowledge in the language, and help them to develop positive listening habits and a proactive attitude, we will certainly see improvements in their listening skills; they will eventually possess cross-conversational ability, which is the goal of English education.

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