

The Significance of Listening Comprehension in English Language Teaching

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Abstract—Listening is a significant language skill to develop in second language learning. Despite its importance, language learners consider listening as the most difficult language skill to learn. Since the role of listening comprehension in language teaching has been repeatedly emphasized, many teachers do not pay enough attention to its importance in their classes. In this paper, the researchers review some important issues concerning listening comprehension to provide a basis for developing listening skill in English language teaching. It starts with a definition of listening and listening comprehension, a brief discussion of reasons for listening, followed by reviewing listening comprehension process, the importance of listening, teachers' roles in listening comprehension, and discuss strategies, techniques, and goals of listening. The review of literature indicated that learners can improve their listening comprehension through the help of teachers, using suitable materials and activities, and practicing a lot.

Index Terms—listening comprehension, reason, process, importance, role, strategies, techniques, goals

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension is an important part of language learning. Learners want to understand native speakers and a lot of multimedia like DVDs and the Internet. Listening is a significant skill to develop in second language learning (Rost, 2001; Vandergrift, 2007; Kurita, 2012). According to Rost (2001) and Kurita (2012), a major difference between more successful and less successful learners is related to their ability to use listening as an instrument of learning.

Listening skill is very important in foreign language learning because the key to learn a language is to receive language input. According to Krashen, Terrell, Ehrman, and Herzog (1984) and Hamouda (2013) acquisition happens when learners have sufficient comprehensible input. Rost (1994) stated that listening is significant in language learning because it provides input for learners and it plays an important role in the development of learners' language.

According to Krashen (1985) and Hamouda (2013), listening skill is an important element in obtaining understandable input. Learning will not occur if there isn't any input. Hasan (2000) and Hamouda (2013) expressed that listening comprehension provides the appropriate situations for the acquisition and expansion of other language skills. Rost (2002) expressed that the development of listening is related to the attainment of proficiency in speaking. He continued that listening is the most important skill in language learning because it is the most widely used language skill in normal daily life.

Listening comprehension process provides beneficial intuitions in teaching listening. Learner may find listening comprehension skill difficult to learn and this can also provide teachers with opportunities to change their listening exercises into more effective ones. Developing listening comprehension skill helps learners to succeed in language learning to enhance comprehensible input. Since learners' self-reliance in listening comprehension will be increased, they will be motivated to have access to spoken English such as conversations with native speakers (Kurita, 2012).

According to Pourhosein Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), listening plays a significant role in the communication process. Ferris (1998), Murphy (1991), Vogely (1998), and Hamouda (2013) expressed that listening is the most frequently used skill in the language classrooms. Therefore, it is obvious that listening is very important for the lives of students since it is used as a means of learning at all phases of instruction. Despite its significance in foreign language learning, the instruction of listening comprehension has been overlooked in many EFL classes. According to Oxford (1990), listening develops faster than the three other language skills and it can make easy the development of the other language skills.

In this paper, important issues concerning listening comprehension were reviewed. The researchers defined the terms listening and listening comprehension, mentioned the reasons for listening, explained listening comprehension process, stated the importance of listening, elaborated teachers' roles in listening comprehension, and discussed strategies, techniques, and goals of listening.

II. DEFINITION OF LISTENING

Listening has been defined by many researchers. Thomlison (1984) and Hamouda (2013) defined listening as the ability to recognize and understand what others are telling. This process includes understanding a speaker's pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and understanding of meaning. Morley (1972) said listening involves auditory discrimination, aural grammar, selecting necessary information, remembering it, and connecting it to the process between sound and form of meaning (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Bowen, Madsen, and Hilferty (1985) demonstrated that listening is understanding the oral language. Students hear oral speech, divide sounds, classify them into lexical and syntactic units, and comprehend the message (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Listening is 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. Listening is a complex process of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know (Rost, 2002 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

According to Goss (1982), listening is a process of understanding what is heard and organizing it into lexical elements to which meaning can be allocated (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). According to Purdy (1997), listening is the process of receiving, making meaning from, and answering to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. Rost (2009) told that listening is an active and important mental ability. It aids us to understand the world around us and is one of the necessary elements in creating successful communication (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

III. DEFINITION OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION

There have been different definitions of the term "listening comprehension." Rost (2002) and Hamouda (2013) defined listening comprehension as an interactive process in which listeners are involved in constructing meaning. Listeners comprehend the oral input through sound discrimination, previous knowledge, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, and the other linguistic or non-linguistic clues (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Nadig (2013) defined listening comprehension as the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language. These involve knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). According to Brown and Yule (1983) and Hamouda (2013), listening comprehension is an individual understanding of what he has heard and it is the listener's ability to repeat the text despite the fact that the listener may repeat the sound without real comprehension.

IV. REASONS FOR REASONING

According to Bouach (2010), listening comprehension is useful for learners' pronunciation. That is, when learners are more exposed to spoken English, they can more know and get used to its pitch, intonation, stress, redundancy, and clusters. Wilson (2008) mentioned some other reasons for listening such as information gathering, enjoyment, unanimity, evaluation, and criticism. In addition, the other reason behind listening is to improve the speaking skill by improving pronunciation.

There are a lot of reasons for listening. There are five main reasons for listening like to engage in social protocols, to exchange information, to enjoy yourself, to share emotions, and to exert control (Hedge 2000). Underwood (1989) expressed that teachers should prepare their students for the following situations:

- a. Attending a lesson. The purpose of this activity is to comprehend the major ideas and to recognize the main information.
- b. Listening to announcements, news, and weather forecast. The main goal of listeners is to obtain pertinent information.
- c. Listening to plays, watching TV, or listening to a radio for entertainment. The objective of this activity is to amuse oneself.
- d. Listening to someone delivering a speech. In this situation, the listener is interested in opinions and attitudes of the speaker.
- e. Following the instructions. The goal of the listener is to perform the function successfully.

V. LISTENING COMPREHENSION PROCESS

Schemata are the guiding structures in the comprehension process. The schema is a data structure for showing the general concepts stored in memory. Schema means an abstract textual structure that the listener uses to understand the text. The listener uses linguistic and situational cues about the new input to extract schemata. When a schema is extracted, it becomes a guiding structure in comprehension. If there is harmony between incoming information and the schema, the listeners will understand the text. The schema results in three basic modes of information processing: bottom-up processing, top-down processing, and interactive processing (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

A. Bottom-up Process

Bottom-up processing is activated by the new data. The data pass into the system through schemata. Schemata are formed from the most specific at the bottom to the most general at the top. In this process, listening decodes the sounds

from the meaningful units to complete texts. Therefore, phonemic units are connected together to make words, words are connected together to make phrases, phrases are connected together to make utterances, and utterances are connected together to make complete and meaningful text. Certain incoming sounds precipitate schemata formed in a listener's mind like the phonological knowledge, the morphological knowledge, and lexical and syntactical knowledge. The listener uses his knowledge of words, syntax, and grammar to work on form in the bottom-up processing (Rubin, 1994 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). This process is closely associated with the listener's linguistic knowledge.

B. Top-down Process

Top-down processing uses background knowledge for understanding the meaning of a message. Top-down processing constructs general predictions based on general schemata and then looks for information to fit into these schemata. The listener actively constructs the original meaning of the speaker using the new input. The listener uses previous knowledge of the context within which the listening happens to comprehend what he/she hears. Context includes knowledge of the topic, the speaker or speakers, and their connection with the situation and with each other and previous happenings. If the incoming information is unfamiliar for the listener, it can't extract his schemata and he can only depend on his linguistic knowledge in listening comprehension. Thus, only depending on top-down processing may lead to the failure of comprehension (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

C. Interactive Process

According to the interactive processing, top-down and bottom-up listening processing should be combined to each other to increase listening comprehension. The application of background knowledge information, contextual information, and linguistic information makes comprehension and interpretation easy. When the content of the material is familiar to the listener, he uses his background knowledge to make predictions which is proved by the new input. If the content of the listening text is unfamiliar to the listener, he can only use his linguistic knowledge, particularly the lexical and syntactical knowledge to understand information (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Comprehension involves perception, parsing, and utilization. Perceptual processing is the encoding of the auditory or written message and it includes chunking phonemes from the continuous speech. A person pays particular attention to input and the sounds are kept in memory. While the input is in memory, the analysis of the language code begins and encoding process changes the input into meaningful representations (Anderson, 1995 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

In the parsing process, words are changed into the mental representation of the combined meaning of words. Proposition is the main unit of listening comprehension. In parsing, a meaning-based representation of the original words can be kept in short-term memory and this representation is an abstraction of the original word sequences that can multiply the original sequences or their planned meaning. The size of the unit processed depends on the learner's language knowledge, general knowledge, and way of presenting information. The purpose of segmentation is meaning that can be indicated syntactically, semantically, and phonologically. Listeners can have some difficulties in comprehending spoken language by native speakers if they are not familiar with the rules for segmentation (Anderson, 1985 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Memory span for target language input is shorter than for native language input. Complex input materials can be difficult to understand in a second language because they require combining of parsed segments in comprehension process and put an extra burden on short-term memory which can already be burdened with un-encoded parts of the new input (Call, 1985 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Utilization process involves connecting a mental representation of the auditory meaning with existing knowledge. Existing knowledge is maintained in long-term memory as propositions or schemata. Connections between the new input meaning and existing knowledge occur through which knowledge in long-term memory is activated so that it is connected with the new meanings in short-term memory. Perception, parsing, and utilization processes are closely connected to each other and can take place simultaneously in listening comprehension. According to Coakley and Wolvin (1986, as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011) listening comprehension involves a listener who brings previous knowledge of the topic, linguistic knowledge and cognitive processes to the listening activity, the aural text, and the interaction between the two.

VI. THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

Listening comprehension needs more concentration and a quick understanding is also required. When listening, 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).

According to Rost (1994) and Ziane (2011), listening comprehension is very important because it is a process through which we get input and without its comprehension learning does not happen. Doff (1995) and Ziane (2011) represented that listening has a significant effect on developing speaking. That is, we cannot develop our speaking ability unless we develop our listening skill. If a learner has a good listening ability in English language, it would be

very easy for him to listen to the radio, to study, watch films, or communicate with foreigners. Learners should have a lot of practice and exposure to English in order to develop this ability. There is a relationship between listening to a language and learning it. If we compare two learners; one is living in a country where the target language is the first language and the other is living in a country where English is only spoken in academic places. The difference is that the first learner can acquire English more easily, effectively, and rapidly than the second one. Consequently, learners need as much exposure to English language as possible.

According to Hedge (2000), listening has an important role in everyday life and when people are engaged in communication nine percent is spent to writing, 16 percent to reading, 30 percent to speaking, and 45 percent to listening which shows the significance of listening in the communication process. Lundsteen (1979) expressed that listening is the first skill to appear. He continued that children listen before they speak. Hedge (2000) indicated that modern society likes to change from printed media towards sound and its members. Therefore, the significance of listening cannot be ignored. He emphasized that listening is of great importance in English language classrooms.

VII. TEACHERS' ROLE IN LISTENING ACTIVITIES

Teachers have a major responsibility in their classes and they can have a great effect on their students to create friendly atmosphere. Harmer (1991) and Macháčková (2009) said that there are eight main roles for teachers:

A. *A teacher as an Organizer*

In this role, teachers should explain what their students want to do, give clear instructions, and give a useful feedback to their students. Teachers also prepare the listening lesson and give obvious guidance to their learners.

B. *A Teacher as a Controller*

A teacher performs the whole lesson. It is a teacher's duty to arrange what students do, when they should speak, and what language they should use. Teachers also determine what students should do in the listening phases.

C. *A Teacher as an Evaluator*

Teachers evaluate their students and give them a feedback on their performance. They should evaluate the level of their students.

D. *A Teacher as a Resource*

In this role, teachers give their students the necessary advice and help them to solve their difficulties specifically unknown vocabulary or grammatical patterns.

E. *A Teacher as a Tutor*

Teachers act as a coach and a resource and help their learners to develop ideas. Teachers assist their learners in every stage and should help them towards predicting missing information.

F. *A Teacher as an Investigator*

Teachers observe the activities in their lessons and assess their learners' performance. They evaluate the advantages of listening activities.

G. *A Teacher as a Prompter*

Teachers urge their students and give recommendations toward activities that are carried out by their learners. Teachers should support their students during every stage of listening activity so that they can be successful.

H. *A Teacher as a Participant*

Teachers take part in the listening activities and must be aware of leading in these activities. They can improve the classroom atmosphere. They participate in pre and post listening activities like discussions and role plays.

VIII. WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING LISTENING?

Chamot and Küpper (1989), Henner Stanchina (1987), Murphy (1985), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), and Ak (2012) have been interested in strategies for listening comprehension. Listening suggests are the skills raise strategies and can be divided into two groups; bottom-up strategies and top-down strategies. Bottom-up strategies concentrate on linguistic features and urge students to analyze individual words for their meaning or grammatical structures before gathering the meanings to form propositions. Top-down strategies concentrate on the overall meaning of phrases and sentences and motivate students to use real world schematic knowledge to develop expectations of text meaning.

According to Vandergrift (1999) and Ak (2012), listening strategies are metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and socio-affective strategies. Metacognitive strategies are mental activities for managing language learning which involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's understanding. They involve thinking about the learning process like selective attention and comprehension monitoring. Cognitive strategies are mental activities for using the language

to do a task that includes using particular techniques to the learning task like explanation and deduction. Socio affective strategies include cooperating with other learners or the teacher for explanation, and using particular techniques to reduce apprehension. They involve activities such as questioning for clarification, cooperation, decreasing worry, and self-encouragement. Mendelsohn (1995) and Ak (2012) expressed that it is very important for learners to use appropriate listening strategies in order to develop their own listening skills. It is significant for learners to use specific strategies based on their own learning needs.

A study was done Abdelhafez (2006). It was about the impact of specific strategies on developing listening skills. The results of this study indicated that training in metacognitive strategies helped learners develop their own listening skills. In many other studies the findings indicated that more-proficient listeners used strategies more often than less-proficient listeners According to Chao (1997), Moreira (1996), Murphy (1987), O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989), Rost and Ross (1991), Vandergrift (1997), Berne (2004), and Ak (2012) more skillful listeners use a lot of strategies and can activate their existing linguistic knowledge to understand better.

IX. WHAT ARE THE TECHNIQUES FOR DEVELOPING LISTENING?

Rixon (1986) and Rubin (1995) stated that different techniques should be used in the classrooms like authentic materials and technology. McBride (2009) and Rost (2007) expressed that the use of technology can promote the expansion of listening comprehension by providing students with interesting materials. Authentic materials involve songs, TV serials, movies, and documentaries and technology includes videos, computers, and the Internet. Authentic materials and technology are closely interrelated to each other since technology is required to operate authentic materials.

Jansen and Vinther (2003), Mc Bride (2011), Robin (2007), and Zhao (1997) and Ak (2012) indicated that the use of technology while using authentic materials can solve difficulties encountered with authentic materials. Many studies have been done concerning the impacts of technology and authentic materials into the classes on listening comprehension. Özgen (2008) examined the impacts of captioned authentic videos on listening comprehension. The results obtained from this study represented that learners watching the videos with captions scored significantly higher than the ones watching the videos without captioning. A study was carried out by Hayati and Mohmedi (2011) towards the effect of videos with subtitles on listening comprehension. The researchers identified three groups: L1 subtitled group, L2 subtitled group, and without subtitle group. The results revealed that the group with English subtitles outperformed the other groups.

Different language skills should be used by learners to increase the development of each skill. It is illogical to detach skills when doing an activity in a specific lesson. The use of different skills can make the activities more meaningful, motivate learners, and create interesting contexts. According to Fotos (2001), Hinkel (2006), Murphy (1991), Snow (2005), and Ak (2012) listening can be used to improve other skills such as reading or speaking skills in all classes and listening can gain from specific skills such as pronunciation. Gilbert (1995) and Nunan and Miller (1995) emphasized that developing listening skills with pronunciation is an effective strategy that should be used in English classes. In this way, it is recommended that teachers instruct and improve listening by mixing it with pronunciation.

X. THE GOALS OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION LESSONS

According to Paulston and Bruder (1976, as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011), listening comprehension lessons have certain goals and all teachers and learners should be aware of these goals. They are as follows:

1. Listening comprehension lessons should be carefully and gradually planned. Listening activities progress from simple to more complex while learners get in language proficiency.
2. Listening comprehension lessons should demand active student participation. Student participation is his/her written answer to the listening comprehension material and immediate feedback on performance that can keep students' concern and motivation.
3. Listening comprehension lessons should provide a communicative necessity for remembering to develop concentration. These two factors are very important in recalling and can be done by giving the students the writing task before listening to the material.
4. Listening comprehension lessons should focus on conscious memory task. One of the aims of listening is to reinforce learners' recall to increase their memory capacity. 'Listening is receiving, receiving needs thinking, and thinking needs memory. It is impossible to separate listening, thinking, and remembering.
5. The focus of listening comprehension lessons is on teaching not testing. The aim of checking learners' responses is just feedback that is a way of helping learners to know how they did and how they are advancing.

XI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the researchers reviewed some important issues towards listening comprehension in English language teaching. Listening is very important in language because it provides input for the learners and without comprehending input, they cannot learn anything. Listening comprehension is a complex skill that should be developed consciously. It

can be developed with practice when learners consider the process of listening without the threat of assessment. The use of listening activities to test students' comprehension results in worry and nervousness which stops the development of listening comprehension strategies. The positive and effective use of strategies affects learners' self-concept, beliefs, and attitudes towards listening comprehension. This paper indicated the significant roles of teachers, listening strategies, and techniques on improving the learners' listening comprehension. Through this paper, the researchers believed that if learners want to improve their listening skill, they should practice it a lot in the target language. The review of literature indicated that learners should be provided with appropriate materials and activities in which they can learn how to understand the English language. Teachers should give learners the opportunity to listen to native speakers' speech, should choose listening texts that are uttered by non-native speakers so that they can develop their listening skills and do not get disappointed. When learners have developed their listening skills to a specified level, teachers can choose texts spoken by native speakers as teaching materials and activities. Suitable teaching in listening comprehension can decrease listening apprehension and provide a good basis for becoming independent learners who can effectively use the listening process for learning. Finally, it can be concluded that guiding learners in the process of listening provides them with the knowledge by which they can successfully complete a listening activity and puts them in control of their learning.

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