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Problems and Activities in Listening Skills in EFL Classrooms; from Tradition to a more Comprehensible Input

Fatih Yavuz^{a*}, Nuriye Degirmenci^a, Serhat Akyuz^a, Hande Yılmaz^a, Ozgur Celik^a

^aBalikesir University, Necatibey Education Faculty, Kasaplar Mah Balikesir 10100 Turkey

Abstract

Listening comes from the emergence of the human being. It has always been a crucial part of interaction. It is not just hearing the other side but through the message having an agreement or giving the right response with the help of grammatical knowledge. While listening understanding the speakers accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary, and grasping his meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously.' (Howatt and Dakin, 1993 p.16). Learners in our context have many problems in getting the intended meaning of their interlocutors. These problems are listed and this paper by giving the literature related to listening skills and lists sample listening programs to help learners to overcome their listening problems.

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1. Introduction

When listening skill has been the issue, there are certainly some difficulties in listening; the first is that people cannot communicate face-to-face unless the two types of skills (listening/speaking) are developed in tandem. Rehearsed production is useless if the interlocutors are unable to respond to the reply generated from our interlocutor. (Anderson and Lynch, 1988 p. 1) The second problem is that under many circumstances listening is a reciprocal skill. People cannot practice listening in the same way as they can rehearse speaking, or at least the part of speaking that has to do with pronunciation, because the listener cannot

* Fatih Yavuz. Tel.: +9 0266 241 27 62.

E-mail address: yavuzf@balikesir.edu.tr, yavuzf@hotmail.com

predict the communication. (Anderson and Lynch, 1988). Another problem connected with the second one is comprehension of what they are listening to as English has become a worldwide language and there are millions of people learning and speaking it, the main learning problem is that they cannot understand what they are listening. The learners may have developed other skills to some degree but English teachers recognize that listening is the major skill enabling the learners to use their other skills.

These skills are more easily described than they are applied. Supposing that a listener is able to predict the topic, tries to grasp unknown words or utterances from the context, uses his knowledge of the world, find the main idea by deleting or adding the utterances around the main idea under the light of discourse matters, it may easily be concluded that the English teacher has had a positive influence. Research has been unable to test whether speed of the discourse permits the listener the chance to process many of the cognitive processes explained above by Willis.

This paper tries to give activities that are mainly used in listening skills to give light to ELT teachers.

2. How to Teach Listening?

For language teachers the main problem is either not to know what to do with the listening skills or absolute obedience to the course book they have selected. If they cannot adopt, edit or change listening activities for their learner, the listening skill becomes the main anxiety source for them and instead of supporting the learners with a kind of comprehensible input it may become the reason for learners' discouragement. The solution of making listening skills digestible for learners is in two ways: at word level and at sentence level.

At word level, in the early stages, the students need practice in hearing and saying the sounds of isolated words as they are ideally pronounced by a native speaker, without the distortions or blurs which commonly occur within the context of natural speech. The exercise types those early level pupils can be given are repetition which they are only expected to repeat what they hear, asking if what they hear is English or not and to decide if they hear the same or different utterances.

At sentence level recognizing colloquial and spontaneous speech becomes easier for learners. So the exercise types at this level are again repetition but this time the length of the utterance is either the phrase or sentence they have heard, identifying word divisions which they are to determine the spoken and the written forms of the utterances, identifying the stressed or unstressed words are in a sentence, and dictation which the teacher seeks for students' understanding the sounds and utterances.

The third type is meaning based activities Ur (1984), divides the comprehension exercises into different purpose-based activities in listening comprehension; these are:

2.1. Listening and making no response

These exercises may also be called no-response exercises and they are used to enrich the learners' listening comprehension skills as much as possible. The exercise types in this group may be

- a. **Following a written text:** where students both read and listen to the text to see how words are pronounced or have the chance to see the actual listening and hearing of a native speaker.
- b. **Pictures:** The learners listen to the teacher or recording and choose the picture or order the pictures as they are mentioned.
- c. **Diagrams, Maps:** The same technique may be used in using diagrams and maps or family trees etc.
- d. **Stories, films and TV programs:** They may be used as no-response activities if they are not too long to make the students feel bored or lose concentration.

2.2. Listening and making short responses

These exercises are applied using the short responses of learners whose levels are elementary or not enough for full communication. The exercises which can be performed during the listening course may be *true/false exercises*. These exercises help the learners to make the connection between speaking and listening and link the two skills by

both listening and responding.

2.3. Listening and making long responses

In these types of exercises, learners are expected to relate to the general sense of a whole sequence of utterances. Predictions; students are asked to guess the meaning or to guess what is going to happen next, filling gaps; this exercise may be done by filling the gaps in a dialogue or text during the listening activity, summarizing; learners are asked to summarize what they have understood from the listening.

2.4. Listening as a basis for study and discussion

The first exercise type in this activity is problem-solving, where the students discuss the listening activity individually or in groups. The text is short and students are given the chance to listen two or more times to be able to discuss the problem mentioned in the listening text.

The second one is jigsaw listening, in which the students are given half parts of the whole listening activity and after listening they join together and come to a conclusion or catch the general idea of the activity. In this listening activity the learners need more than one tape-recorder and cassettes or another solution may be taking the students into the listening activity group by group; after one group listens, the other comes in and while they are listening the first group is outside the class.

The third one is commonly used exercise type; involving complementary texts where the students complete some information on a chart or in a dialogue.

The last one is interpretative listening in which the students try to make some interpretations about the speakers' personalities, their relationships.

4. Conclusion

All of these listening tasks are given here to suggest to both learners and the teachers some alternative techniques which may enhance the current curriculum. It is important here to apply these tasks at the appropriate level with the appropriate students. The instructor has also an important role in planning and knowing the task because the wrong type of exercise may discourage the learners. EFL classrooms need more practice than theory.

As stated by Krashen (2009) only comprehensible input is necessary and makes sense if the purpose of language education is to make learners acquire the kind of language that they need to express themselves. So by improving the comprehensible syllabus for students, education can serve to the purpose.

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