Learners' Awareness of Listening Comprehension

A percepção dos alunos da compreensão da escuta

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Listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often, it has been overlooked by its elder sister – speaking. For most people, being able to claim knowledge of a second language means being able to speak and write in that language. Listening and reading are therefore secondary skills – means to other ends, rather ends in themselves.

(David Nunan)

Resumo

Aprender a escutar é uma habilidade que precisa ser trabalhada e treinada. Compreender uma segunda língua requer muito mais do que entender o vocabulário; é necessário compreender além da língua, o que está subentendido, a intenção do falante e o contexto em que determinada expressão foi pronunciada. Além de um breve histórico sobre teorias lingüísticas nesta área, este artigo faz considerações sobre o desenvolvimento desta habilidade e apresenta razões que tornam as atividades de "listening" tão difíceis aos alunos.

Palavras-chave: Habilidade, compreensão, comunicação.

Abstract

Learning how to listen is a skill which needs to be learned and trained. Understanding a second language requires much more than just understanding vocabulary; it is necessary to understand beyond the language, what is beneath the words, the intention of the speaker and the context where certain expression was pronounced. In addition to a brief history about linguistic theories in this field, this article makes considerations on the development of this ability and presents reasons that make listening activities so hard for students.

Key words: Skill, comprehension, communication.

According to Peterson (apud Celce-Murcia, 1991:108): 'Learning to speak a language is very largely a task of learning to hear it'. The speaker has a thought, he/she encodes it into language, the listener decodes the language and then has the speaker's thought. Communication is seen as the exchange of thought tokens, in other words, the student has not only to learn to understand the forms of the foreign language, the sound segments, the word forms, the

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sentence structures, but also to interact with context to constrain the possible meaning. Listening comprehension has never caught so much attention from teachers as it has done recently. The overlook at language learning as speaking being the mainstream does not exclude listening because comprehension is the basis for communication.

As we live in a totally visual society, it is assumed that when the input is through listening little or very little is assimilated. On the other hand, aural comprehension is being recognized as an essential survival skill for second language learners. Learning to listen in a foreign language is quite a different process from learning to listen in the native language, though. There are three major areas related to the problem: (1) the difficulty in remembering the messages contained in extended speech; (2) the rapid-sounding pace of the speech, contrasting to the deliberated and well-articulated talk most often heard in the classroom; and (3) the great number of unfamiliar words heard which are not learned in a natural context. These are evident reasons for students not having aural-comprehension as their preferred sensorial learning styles, showing they are always in need of visual stimuli. Sensory preferences are one of the most obvious aspects of learning styles. They are the perceptual modes through which students take in information. According to Reid (1995:35), these perceptions are visual, tactile, kinesthetic and auditory. *Visual* students prefer to learn through visual channel. They need visual stimuli, they need written directions. *Tactile* and *kinesthetic* preferences are often grouped together in a category called 'haptic' (Oxford and Lavine, 1991:38). They require movement and frequent breaks in the activity. *Auditory* students enjoy the oral-aural learning channel and for these students in general only oral directions are enough. Thus, it is the role of the teacher to provide learning opportunities for all different styles. Some teachers think that listening is the easiest skill to be taught, on the other hand, most students think it is the most difficult to improve. This contradiction tells us that there are some aspects about teaching listening that need to be explored. We must find out all we can about how listening comprehension can be improved and what activities are useful to do this, and then use this knowledge and these activities in our own classrooms.

In our normal experience in the mother tongue the language grows in context, whereas in understanding a foreign language the experiences of context are brought into understanding. The more we know about the situation, the more readily we will understand the language being used. Language is inferred from and understood in context, and the fundamental assumptions about the ways language works and the way communication takes place are changing. If students' burden in listening comprehension does not arise from difficulties in decoding the signal, where do they arise from? It may be a possibility that students and teachers would have a clearer idea and a better understanding of what may happen in students' intaking messages while performing a listening task if they all were aware of the objective of the activity.

Listening can occur at a number of points in a teaching sequence. Sometimes it is the start-off for another activity; other times it is the main focus of a lesson or even the wrap-up of a topic. In general one should aim at using listening material for as many purposes as possible until one can evidence through output whether the input has been internalized, but its use must always be in a context. On the other hand, practice of listening for pleasure with no specific task or exercise to be completed by the students gives them the opportunity of experiencing the foreign language from a different point of view: one which is real, pleasant, relaxing, inviting, motivating, and, above all, involving. Students are fascinated by songs, movies, TV stars, famous personalities and athletes. Tapes with interviews, video clips, movies, films, sports activities and competitions are very much appreciated by students. The use of pleasure-listening and receptive-listening may involve students in the learning process, enhancing motivation and promoting acquisition as well.

In this article I will present a brief history of listening theories, from the starting point when linguists began to worry about pronunciation up to the current theories which are addressed to pragmatics, and understanding context. Then I will proceed

with some considerations about the listening skill development and its difficulties.

BRIEF HISTORY OF LISTENING THEORY

Listening-comprehension is quite a new concern if compared to reading, writing and speaking theories. Until the '50s it was not taken seriously in the mainstream of English language teaching. Nevertheless, it has an important role in language teaching methodology today. Techniques and materials for teaching listening were developed once it was recognized that it is not a passive skill, and that the hearer takes an important part in the communication process.

As the idea of 'teaching the four skills' developed during the late '50s and the '60s, listening comprehension, as one of those skills, began to be given a little more attention (Gillian Brown, 1987:11). It was assumed that the biggest problem in listening to a foreign language was the identification of sounds that make up words. Moreover, it would be merely recognition that would constitute the understanding of the spoken form. The kind of exercises used at this time consisted of listening to a clearly pronounced triple of words, two of which were identical and the third one pronounced as a phonemic contrast. Similar exercises were constructed to distinguish different word stress. By the mid-'60s a more sophisticated addition was made to the discrimination exercise where students were required to understand the 'meaning' indicated by the intonation of a sentence. The sentence would be spoken slowly and clearly, in isolation, and the student had to identify whether the sentence was intended as a statement, an instruction, or a polite request. The significant difference between understanding the spoken language and the written language was based exclusively on decoding the sounds of the foreign language: the segments, word stress and intonation. The isolation of the structures in this approach was clearly derived from the structuralistic tradition, consisting of sets of drills for repetition and constant exercise. It was assumed that this process would develop articulated skills to be added to the listening comprehension.

It was, of course, understood that students should not only be exposed to words or sentences pronounced in isolation, but also be exposed to continuous texts. Courses were produced which included tapes of a passage read aloud where students were required to listen to a sentence at a time and write down what they had heard. A later variant on the standard dictation exercise was to construct a 'situationalized' dialogue between two people. Essentially the spoken text was being made as similar as possible to a written text. The comprehension exercises the student was required to perform were precisely the same type as those performed in a written comprehension class.

It was clear that the development of the communicative syllabus, during the '70s, re-addressed the balance between written and spoken English. Spoken language production classes are often found difficult to manage since language laboratory teaching has declined and the emphasis on spoken language teaching has shifted to listening comprehension. This shift coincides with the increased interest for linguists in discourse analysis, conversational discourse and with the increased interest in the structure of meaning. At the same time, there was throughout the '70s, and it has been going on up to the present, a steadily increase in research about language understanding in cognitive psychology and pragmatics, that is, the study of the language from the point of the users' view, the choices they make, the constraints they find in using the language in social interaction and the effects of their use of language on other participants. Nowadays, the mainstream of learning to listen is that second language learners must understand what goes 'beneath' the surface of the language in order to interpret it correctly.

Information gathering and information usage are recommended for listening structural activities in the second language curriculum. Listening comprehension in today's language curriculum must go far beyond a 20-minute tape a day, followed by tasks about content and checking understanding. According to Morley, as mentioned by Celce-Murcia (1991:93), there are six broad categories for students to produce language based on listening input that should be included in the syllabus:

(1) listening and performing actions and operations;

(2) listening and transferring information;

(3) listening and solving problems;

(4) listening, evaluating and manipulating information;

(5) interactive listening and negotiating meaning through questioning (answering routines);

(6) listening for enjoyment, pleasure and sociability (songs, stories, plays, poems and jokes are some samples).

Still to Morley (apud Celce-Murcia, 1991), the evolution of instructional procedures to teach listening can be divided into three different types. Each uses the term 'listening' from its particular perspective on the nature of language learning and the situational teaching predominance:

(1) listening to repeat (imitation and memorization used in audiolingual models)

(2) listening to understand (comprehension of meaning as a communicative language function, the development of listening as a skill)

(3) listening as a primary focus in the 'comprehension approach' to second/foreign language learning.

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE LISTENING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Listening is used far more often than any other language skill in everyday speech. One can expect to listen twice as much as he/she speaks, reads or writes. The importance of listening cannot be underestimated because speaking does not constitute communication unless what is said is comprehended by another person. Thus, *teaching* listening has a major importance if teachers aim to reach communication and to improve listening skills as a major priority.

The ideal environment for improving in a second language is one where the target language is spoken and heard all the time. However, EFL students do not have the ESL students' advantage of a supportive English-language environment to reinforce what they have worked on in the classroom. The teacher must therefore provide activities that stimulate such an environment as much as possible, together with specific exercises to develop the skill of listening, resulting into a real active learning teaching process.

There is a feeling among language teachers that the listening skill is automatically acquired by the learner as he/she learns to speak the language, but it is not so. Our students need skill in understanding spoken English in order to be able to communicate with speakers of English as well as to get some pleasure from the language through movies, television, records, and so on. It is important that this specific practice be regular in order to give students a sense of progress and continuity of purpose. Frequent practice eliminates the feeling that one is being tested, because not very rarely, listening-comprehension activities are confused, by students as well as teachers, with tests. Students get tense because the testing situation impedes the fulfillment of the listening-comprehension exercise.

A listener of his/her own language does not try to process every bit of information, and he/she does not seem to process information entirely sequentially. He/She will recognize some information immediately, and then anticipate what is coming next. He/She listens to enough of the message to confirm his/her guess while he/she is selecting cues by which he/she guesses future information. "Short-term memory can store auditory input for a handful of seconds, the listener can take advantage of redundancy, pauses, fillers and the like, to go back and process those signals before the trace is lost" (Kolf, 1985:14). This happens

unconsciously and in fractions of seconds. For second language learners, the process is not the same. There are a number of causes which prevent learners from taking it naturally. The rapid-sounding pace of the speech, the overwhelming number of unfamiliar words heard, the difficulty in remembering the messages contained in the extended speech and the seeking for understanding every single word instead of a chunk of ideas are problems which define the great difference between listening in a foreign language and listening in the native language.

Cues to guessing upcoming information can come in all ways: syntactic, semantic, cultural. These should be trained and emphasized in language classes. Recognition, anticipation and prediction are important in comprehending messages transmitted orally, and classroom activities need to be provided to assist students to develop this capacity for guessing what will come next. An important reason for giving special attention to this skill is the fact that incompetence in it is easy to hide through nodding and shaking the head, which may give the impression of understanding, even when this is not happening.

WHY IS LISTENING SO DIFFICULT?

One should not think that listening is difficult because of the learners' lack of capacity. There are a number of factors that interfere in the process of speech and can block comprehension. The first and greatest affective barrier is the fear of the unknown, which prevents students from concentrating on the message. Also, a listener may comprehend short utterances and yet have trouble remembering the information of extended speech. Why is this so? It is partly due to his/her failure to distinguish between items of high and low information value and to anticipate them. He/She tends to listen to every word, disregarding redundancy. The basic problem with listening to every word is that it hinders the student's ability from keeping up. By the time he/she is on the third word, the speaker is on the sixth. And

the longer the message, the further behind the listener gets.

Douglas Brown (1994:252-254) listed eight characteristics of spoken language which may prevent comprehension:

(1) Clustering: in spoken language, due to memory limitations, we process information by grouping ideas, in clauses or phrases, to retain what we hear more easily. Teachers need to help students to pick up relevant words for clustering.

(2) Redundancy: spoken language also has a great deal of redundancy, repetition, and elaboration for clarifying the speech. Students have to be aware of the fact that redundancy helps the hearer to process meaning by offering 'more time' and 'extra information'.

(3) Reduced Forms: reduced forms can be *phonological, morphological, syntactic* and *pragmatic.* These reductions pose significant difficulties especially to classroom learners who may have first been exposed to full forms of the English language.

(4) Performance Variables: native listeners are conditioned to hear hesitations, false starts, pauses, and corrections; on the other hand, these variables can interfere with comprehension in second language learners. Moreover, everyday casual speech by native speakers commonly contains ungrammatical forms.

(5) Colloquial Language: idioms, slang, reduced forms and shared cultural knowledge are manifested at the same time in the conversation and may cause difficulty in comprehension for learners who have never been exposed to it.

(6) Rate of Delivery: the number and length of pauses used by a speaker is sometimes more crucial than the fast speed speech. Learners need to be able to understand language delivered at various rates of speed and with different pauses.

(7) Stress, Rhythm, and Intonation: these patterns are significant not only for interpreting elements such as questions or statements but also messages such as sarcasm, endearment, insult, solicitation, praise, etc.

(8) Interaction: all rules of interaction take part in conversations – negotiation, clarification, turn-taking, maintenance and termination. Interacting by giving feedback, asking for clarification, maintaining a topic and

so on constitutes the process of comprehension in communication.

Fan Yagang (1993:16-19) stated four sources that show why listening is difficult: the message to be listened to, the speaker, the listener and the physical setting.

The Message: many learners find it difficult to listen to a taped message. The listening material may deal with almost any area of life. It might include street gossip, proverbs, new products and situations unfamiliar to the students. Also, in a spontaneous conversation speakers frequently change topics. The content is usually not well organized. In many cases on recorded materials, listeners cannot predict what speakers are going to say. Messages on the radio or tape cannot be listened to at a slower speed. Even in conversation one cannot ask the speaker to repeat something as many times as the hearer might like. About linguistic features, there is the linking of words in speech when the second word begins with a vowel, or leaving a sound out when a word is pronounced in rapid speed. The use of colloquial words and expressions and slang are all common phenomena that can make it difficult for students to distinguish or recognize individual words in the stream of speech.[1]

The speaker: either in ordinary speech or in more formal ones, one tends to say a good deal more than what would seem necessary to convey his/her message. Redundant utterances may take several forms, such as repetition, false starts, re-phrasing, self-correction, and some meaningless addition as 'I mean' or 'you know', to give the speaker time to elaborate information. This redundancy is a natural feature of the language and may help or not the students depending on their level. It may make it more difficult for beginners to understand what the speaker is saying; on the other hand, it may help advanced students to 'tune in' to the speaker's voice and speech form. Natural dialogues are full of hesitations, pauses, and uneven intonation, so students who are used to an even pace of speech may find the former kind of listening difficult to understand.

The listener: one problem in the listening-comprehension class is that students tend to become absent-minded while listening when they have difficulty understanding the recorded material. There are many aspects in this area that teachers should be concerned about: (1) foreign-language learners usually devote more time to reading than to listening and so there is a lack of exposure to different kinds of listening materials; (2) psychological and physical factors may have a negative effect on perception and interpretation. It is tiring for students to concentrate on interpreting unfamiliar sounds, words, and sentences for long periods; (3) students are not familiar enough with clichés and collocations to be able to predict a missing word or phrase, and (4) it lacks socio-cultural and contextual knowledge of the target language. Another important aspect is that learners tend to be restricted to one kind of accent, what makes it hard for them to understand other accents.

Physical Setting: there are some relevant aspects to be taken into consideration: (1) background noise, either on the recording or in the environment, can distract student's attention; (2) listening material on tape lacks visual clues and body language, including facial expressions, and (3) unclear sounds resulting from bad quality recording. The reader can go back and forth in the material, but the listener cannot do the same thing. Thus, any inattention to what is being said at the moment can easily cause him/her to lose an important part of the message.

Besides all the problems mentioned above, a student's limited lexical knowledge is another essential troublesome area. The listening skill will not be completely achieved if there are gaps in understanding the vocabulary. The student's speaking vocabulary comprises a narrow range of words that he/she can speak at his/her own pace and according to his/her purposes. However, when the student is listening, he/she needs to have the ability to distinguish between words he/she can

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[1] This idea of *Message* proposed by Fan Yagang could be considered a summary of the eight characteristics given by Douglas Brown, **Teaching by Principles**. An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall Regents, 1994.

manipulate when speaking and the ones he/she can handle when listening.

Morley, as mentioned by Celce-Murcia (1991:88-89), proposed other aspects of communication which can cause comprehension troubles for students who are not aware of the fact that communication is a two-way trip and is not restricted to words. Messages are conveyed in three ways:

Linguistic messages: in an attempt to convey an 'intended' meaning, speakers choose words and arrange them into sentences or groups of sentences in larger pieces of monologue or dialogue discourse patterns. The words chosen affect the linguistic information. This affective interpretation must be part of listening comprehension activities, which must be contextualized and try to reflect real-world situations and feelings.

Paralinguistic messages: the words and sentences chosen to convey the message are carried out with vocal features that transmit the speaker's attitude toward what he/she is saying. The vocal elements go beyond the neutral stress, rhythm and intonation patterns. There is more in how one says something than in what one says.

Extralinguistic messages: speakers who convey meaning through body language. Simultaneous 'physical' messages, such as body postures, body movements, body and hand gestures, facial expressions and eye contact, are being transmitted together with the word and vocal information. However, the speaker may not be fully aware of this aspect of communication.

Listening activities are more and more frequent in language classes, but are they effective and efficient? There is no exact way to measure how much was acquired in a listening activity. However, by applying task-based activities, teachers may have more evidence on the students' performance and may be more able to check if the output produced by the students has been modified, or not, after the listening input.

Filling out forms or making choices oblige learners to try to produce something from what they hear. There is more about that, though. John Field (apud Richards, 2002:244) stated:

In real life, listening to a foreign language is a *strategic activity*. Nonnative listeners recognize only part of what they hear ... and have to make guesses which link these fragmented pieces of text. This is a process in which our learners need practice and guidance. Cautious students need to be encouraged to take risks and to make inferences based on the words they have managed to identify. Natural risk takers need to be encouraged to check their guesses against new evidence as it comes from the speaker. And all learners need to be shown that making guesses is not a sign of failure.

Being aware of the fact that listening comprehension does not happen just because one is listening is half the way of the learning process. Listening comprehension is not an easy skill to be developed. It requires specific training and well-developed task-based activities for the listening skill to be acquired and improved, just as the speaking skill does. For this latter ability, though, students and people in general have many extra-linguistic ways to communicate that help production of the language, such as body language, gestures and facial expressions. Yet, for listening, what students have, besides context, is the language itself. Thus, for a complete understanding they have to comprehend 'behind the lines', the pragmatic context, the speaker's intention, and they only learn this through practice. Teachers have, then, to provide opportunities for students to practice predicting, guessing, drawing conclusions, because these are some of the strategies native speakers use for understanding listening, thus these are some of the strategies language learners should use as well.

Moreover, every time students are supposed to do a listening activity, they may begin to develop negative thoughts, feelings and attitudes, even before the listening exercise is assigned, which will transform this listening-comprehension lesson into a negative experience. These feelings arise from the fear of the unknown, the fear of failure, or of not being able to understand. All this may result in lack of concentration and discouragement, generating a wrong atmosphere in the classroom, delaying the purpose of the activity

and students' development. Thus, students should be encouraged to tell the teacher when they feel they are ready. Also motivation is a very important tool for any exercise, besides stopping the tape every now and then to see if students are having any trouble following it. Anticipating new vocabulary and structures may be a very good strategy to lower students' affective filter and get them involved in the activity.

The task of learning to hear is not an easy one. It involves the general knowledge students have of the language, and also involves knowing how to apply strategies they use in their first language to learn the second or foreign language. According to Morley, (1996) there are two second language learning features which establish the importance of well-structured attention in relation to aural-comprehension: (1) "Proficiency in listening comprehension makes a central contribution to the learner's overall development of competency in the second/foreign language;" and (2) "The systematic development of listening comprehension is of critical importance not only as input for learning to speak the language, but also as a premier skill in its own right."

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Textura