

## ***Strategies in Teaching Listening, and Language Learning***

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### **Abstract**

*The essence of teaching is to impart knowledge to learners at whatever level the teacher is engaged in. This purpose cannot be successfully achieved if the teacher does not employ the appropriate strategy in this process of making the learners change their behaviour due to exposure to what the teacher wants them to learn. Language refers to a communication system. It is either spoken or written as agreed upon by members of the speech community. In the formal setting, it is taught; in the informal setting, it is acquired. If taught, the learners grasp the art of speaking through listening to the teacher. The success of the teaching, to a far extent, depends on the ability of the teacher to adopt the right approach to teaching. Three of these approaches are bottom-up, top-down, and interactive teaching strategies or approaches. This paper therefore explores the concept of teaching and how these three strategies could help listeners (learners) in coming to terms with what the teacher is teaching. It draws a conclusion that the three approaches are essential in teaching listening. It also recommends that language teachers should utilize these strategies for effective teaching/learning of listening comprehension in schools.*

**Keywords:** Strategies, teaching, listening, learning, language.

### **Introduction**

The concept of teaching is as old as human existence. Be it at home, that is, in an informal setting, or in school in a formal setting, teaching aims at doing the same thing – impartation of knowledge, skills, attitudes, behavioural changes, and so on, to learners. Teaching includes the procedures of instruction in assisting learners get information that would lead to their becoming aware of what they were not aware of before. It is to cause a learner to have knowledge about an idea or concept, belief or doctrine, in order to change or influence the view of the learner on such facts. Learning is carried out under the tutelage of a teacher, who is variously referred to as an instructor, a reformer, a refiner, a change agent, a character-moulder.

Teaching is concerned with inculcating in learners specific skills, knowledge, appreciation, attitudes and ideas that would influence the behaviour pattern of learners. It focuses on helping learners to acquire experiences through activities that are planned to achieve that purpose. Through sense of humour, good command of the English language and skill in arousing learners' interest (Oyetunde, 2013), the teacher interacts with the learners so as to cause a positive behavioural change for not only the learners but for the overall benefit of the larger society. Through teaching, societal transformation takes place in a positive way. For the desired behavioural change to manifest in the learners, the teacher must adopt appropriate strategies for imparting that knowledge that would bring about positive change in attitudinal behaviour.

The essence of teaching is to provide knowledge. The process of providing this knowledge is done in such a way that the learner, at the end, is able to differentiate between what he/she was before the teaching and what he/she is after the teaching. To achieve this, the teacher adopts some strategies to affect the objective of the lesson. The strategy adopted is informed by the needs of learners as stated in the objectives of the lesson, learners' maturation age, intellectual level and environmental factors. Three strategies that the teacher could utilize in teaching listening are the bottom-up, top-down, and interactive (meta-cognitive) teaching strategies.

### **Bottom-up teaching strategy**

In bottom-up teaching strategy, teaching proceeds from the most basic blocks of language, like the word. The teaching pattern proceeds to more complex structures before finally arriving at meaning. This means that in bottom-up strategy, the teacher teaches exact phrases and words, and progresses to teaching individual grammatical structures or sentence structures. The bottom-up language teaching approach is where the teacher starts with the component parts of a subject and gradually builds up to the whole. A language teacher begins the teaching from phonics, letters, vowels, to syllables. These components are the building blocks of language. The teacher proceeds to teaching speaking and reading after the learners have mastered the basic rules and systems. Bottom-up teaching strategy is instructor-driven. It pays attention to the minutiae of language so as to enable learners decode and make every component simple via the process of repetition and memorization (Shang, 2010).

One shortcoming of bottom-up teaching strategy is the absence of emphasis on learning within the context of a larger whole, even though the strategy builds in the learners the ability to have a firm grasp of the fundamentals of the subject. This is because even though learners comprehend the specific meanings of words, they may not comprehend the meaning of the word when the contextual or cultural basis of the word changes.

Igowein's (2012) position about bottom-up is that it is a text-and-data-driven-based processing. It is text-based because the listeners (learners) rely on the language in the message. Listeners usually construct meaning from the smallest units of letters and words to larger ones like phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs. This implies the combination of sounds, words and grammar generally to create meaning. According to Vandergrift (2013), bottom-up strategy includes, listening for specific details, recognizing cognates and recognizing order of word pattern. For Hestrup, (2013) bottom-up utilizes information about sounds and word meanings to gather an understanding of what has been presented by the speaker.

Basically therefore, the bottom-up strategy focuses on the features of the spoken text: phonemes, individual words and grammatical elements which need to be comprehended in order to understand the message in the spoken text. In storytelling and debate, students (learners) have to listen to stories by the teacher and raise points in a debate to arrive at meanings. These require listeners to focus on the language features of the speaker by understanding the sounds, intonations, accents, vocabulary and all the grammatical items of the speaker, that is, the teacher's linguistic features.

Vandergrift (2013) and Rost (2006) however view this process as having failed to take into cognizance the listeners' background knowledge in relation to the spoken text. Besides, bottom-up process does not give room for listeners to interact with the speaker or the spoken text. It does not also give room for active cognitive abilities like drawing inferences, predicting, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating the spoken text (Vandergrift, 2013). Lingzhu (2003) states that active listening must occur in an interactive setting which the bottom-up process does not guarantee. Lingzhu (2003) found out that the bottom-up listening process enables learners to optimally make meaning out of what is presented by the teacher. Since comprehension in the classroom is of essence, bottom-up strategy assists learners in their learning tasks.

### **Top-down teaching strategy**

This teaching strategy focuses on macro-features of the spoken text such as the speaker's purpose and the topic of the message. In this process, the listener (learner) will depend on the knowledge he/she already possesses to help him/her understand new information as it is presented. Abdalhamid (2012) explains that the top-down strategy includes predicting, making inferences and evaluating. Shang (2008) notes that the top-down strategy can easily be more utilized by advanced learners than beginners.

The top-down listening process is a technique that helps listeners to draw inferences from the information and predict what information will be presented. Shang (2008) also explains that the top-down listening process utilizes schemata (background

knowledge and global understanding) to drive meaning from and interpret the message. Lingzhu (2003) avers that top-down listening process depends very much on the listeners' past experiences. This makes it the ideal skill set for comprehending new information that is related to the listener's past experience. Besides, top-down listening model means using our prior knowledge and experiences to relate to new information. It requires a listener/learner using his/her background knowledge to interpret and understand a message.

Igowein (2012) posits that the top-down model focuses on the listener. The listener taps into his background knowledge of the topic and the situation or context of the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that will help the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. The top-down process usually deals with non-linguistic features. According to Gaiyan (2012), top-down strategy includes:

- i) Listening for the main idea
- ii) Predicting
- iii) Drawing inferences
- iv) Summarizing.

The top-down listening strategy is often neglected by language teachers in listening classes, as observed by Gaiyan (2012), despite its importance especially at the pre-listening stage. Pinsta (2007) further suggests that language teachers should endeavour to arrange suitable activities to activate students' minds and provide necessary background knowledge to what they (learners) are about to listen to.

Storytelling and debate, as interactive listening activities in a Second Language listening class, could help listeners practice effective listening as they adopt the top-down listening process. According to Shang (2008, p.38), 'storytelling as an interactive listening activity gives room for effective listeners to utilize the top-down listening strategy through the sub-skills of listening comprehension by predicting and inferring the message or the content of the stories being told'. Top-down listening model is therefore critical in enhancing listening comprehension during storytelling activities. Lingzton (2003) notes that both bottom-up and top-down listening strategies are valid. However, they primarily depend on the content of the spoken text a listener is listening to.

### **Interactive teaching strategy**

This is also called the meta-cognitive strategy. Randeil (2009) opines that listening comprehension involves interactive processing. Lingzton (2003) asserts that bottom-up and top-down processes work together in a cooperative process to arrive at effective comprehension of oral input. Effective language listeners try to decode the meanings of individual words. This simply explains that listening is the result of an interaction

among a number of some pieces of knowledge. The knowledge of individual linguistic units such as phonemes, words or grammatical structures and the role of the listener's expectation, the situation, background knowledge and the topic, are all important for listeners/learners to be able to understand the teacher as he/she teaches.

The opinion of Randeil (2009) is that top-down and bottom-up listening strategies are appropriate to the listening task and can make listening flexible and interactive. Students' comprehension improves and increases when they use top-down, bottom-up and meta-cognitive strategies. Lingzton (2003) explains that the combination of the top-down and bottom-up strategies gives rise to the meta-cognitive strategies. Meta-cognition is a skill in listening strategy that blends both the top-down and bottom-up models. Listeners (learners) who use meta-cognitive strategy consider their familiarity with the subject matter being presented and use their listening strategy to fit into the situation. Additionally, meta-cognitive listeners could switch from the top-down to bottom-up model when necessary to maximize comprehension. It is therefore, essential for the language teacher to be conversant with this interactive process during teaching tasks. This interactive process can be helpful in maximizing comprehension (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

### **Conclusion/recommendations**

It is therefore imperative for the English teacher as a Second Language teacher to note that for effective listening comprehension to take place, all the three strategies, bottom-up, top-down and the meta-cognitive processes, are essential. The language teacher is encouraged to present interesting listening activities in the listening class that will involve learners in using the three strategies/models for effective learning. Storytelling and debate activities could fit into the top-down and interactive models of listening as listeners may have the opportunity of interacting with the spoken text. This will involve listeners making use of their prior knowledge to arrive at effective comprehension.

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