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The Importance of Listening Comprehension in Language Learning

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Abstract

Many studies in language learning have indicated that listening comprehension plays an important role in the learning process. In spite of its importance, listening has been ignored in second language learning, research, and teaching. The purpose of the present article is to define the terms listening and listening comprehension, review the components of listening, explain teachers' role in listening comprehension, and present the general principles of listening comprehension. The literature review demonstrated that learners' listening comprehension skill can be improved by teachers' assistance and the use of appropriate learning materials and activities.

Keywords: listening, listening comprehension, components, role, principles

1. Introduction

If learners want to learn to speak, they should first learn to understand the spoken language they hear. If learners want to communicate with native speakers, they should first learn to understand in real language situations to comprehend the main pint of what native speakers are telling. Therefore, listening is very important to which teachers and learners should pay enough attention to obtain communication aims. Listening is very important in language learning because it provides input for learners and it has also an important role in the development of learners' language knowledge (Rost, 1994).

According to Kurita (2012), learners may find listening comprehension skill difficult to learn and this requires teachers to change their listening exercises into more effective ones. The development of listening comprehension skill helps learners to succeed in language learning and increase their comprehensible input. Since learners' self-confidence in listening comprehension can be increased, they are motivated to have access to spoken English like conversations with native speakers.

Although the instruction of listening comprehension has long been overlooked in many EFL programs (Mendelsohn, 1994; Pourhossein Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011), listening is considered as much more important in both EFL classrooms and SLA research. Nunan (1998 as cited in Pourhossein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011) said that listening includes an active process of decoding and making meaning from both verbal and non-verbal messages.

In this paper, important issues concerning listening comprehension were reviewed. The researcher defines the terms listening and listening comprehension, explains components of listening comprehension process, elaborates teachers' roles in in listening comprehension, and reviews principles in teaching listening comprehension.

2. Definition of Listening

Listening consists of auditory discrimination, aural grammar, choosing necessary information, remembering it, and connecting it to the process between sound and form of meaning (Morley, 1972 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Rost (2009) told that listening is an active mental ability. It helps us to understand the world around us and is one of the necessary parts in making successful communication (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Pourhossein Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) stated that listening includes listening for thoughts, feelings, and intentions and this needs active involvement, effort, and practice.

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3. Definition of Listening Comprehension

There are different definitions of the term "listening comprehension." Listening comprehension is the different processes of understanding the spoken language. These include knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences (Nadig, 2013 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). According to Hamouda (2013), listening comprehension refers to the understanding of what the listener has heard and it is his/her ability to repeat the text despite the fact that the listener may repeat the sounds without real comprehension.

O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989 as cited in Pourhossein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011) said that listening comprehension is an active process in which the listener constructs meaning through using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon numerous strategic resources to perform the task requirement.

4. Components of Listening Comprehension

According to Chastain (1988), listening comprehension is divided into four components. The first is the ability to differentiate all sounds, intonation patterns, and voice qualities in the second language and to distinguish between them and the same sounds in the native language. The second is the understanding of the whole message uttered by a speaker. Rivers (1981) said that the understanding of spoken messages depend on comprehension of semantic meaning, moving from what one comprehends in the sound sequence with respect to the knowledge of syntax only when the meaning is not understandable.

The third is the ability to hold that message in one's auditory memory until it can be processed. To develop the learners' auditory memory, teachers should know that they hear as much language as possible. This means that most of the class time should be carried out in the language being taught. The speed of presentation and difficulty level of the content must be adjusted to the learners. Language activities that are comprehensible increase auditory memory. The significant point here is the idea of improvement. The improvement from the simpler to the more intricate sentences should be slow and continuous. The speed of delivery should be increased based on the learners' ability to understand (Chastain, 1988).

Comprehension is the speech reception at the syntactic, lexical, pragmatic, and discourse levels. Thus the last component is comprehension. It involves different steps. The first step is to establish the context. Real language happens within a communicative framework and the listener should know the framework to recreate the speaker's message. The second step is to activate related background knowledge and use it to predict the ideas the message may have. The third step is to anticipate the general content of the message. Skilled listening requires that listener look ahead in anticipation of what is coming. They are checking the received material as opposed to trying to make an unexpected and immediate interpretation (Kaspar, 1984).

The fourth step is to sample the important meaning carrying components of the material. Listeners should expend more energy to understand material about unfamiliar topics and they rely more on linguistic clues to make up for their lack of background knowledge. The last step is to use the samples to confirm or reject the formerly made anticipations. When the samples are in line with listeners' anticipations, they accept them as being correct. When the samples do not comply with their anticipations, they should reconsider either their anticipation or the material as they look for making the message meaningful (Kaspar, 1984).

5. Teachers' Role in Listening Activities

According to Harmer (1991) and Macháčková (2009), there are some roles for teachers. They are as follows:

5.1 A teacher as an Organizer

Teachers should explain what their learners want to do, give clear instructions and useful feedback to them. Teachers should prepare the listening lesson and give guidance to their learners.

5.2 A Teacher as a Controller

A teacher accomplishes the whole lesson. It is a teacher's responsibility to arrange what learners do, when they should speak, and what language they should use. Teachers specify what learners should do in the listening stages.

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5.3 A Teacher as an Evaluator

Teachers evaluate their learners and give them the necessary feedback on their performance. They should evaluate the level of their learners.

5.4 A Teacher as a Resource

Teachers give their learners the necessary advice and help them solve their problems particularly unfamiliar vocabulary or grammatical patterns.

5.5 A Teacher as a Tutor

Teachers act as a coach and help their learners to develop ideas. Teachers should help their learners towards predicting missing information.

5.6 A Teacher as a Prompter

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

6. General Principles in Teaching Listening Comprehension

According to Morley and Lawrence (1971), there are general principles for teaching listening comprehension. They are as follows:

1. Listening comprehension lessons should have definite goals and they should be clearly stated.

2. Listening comprehension lessons should be constructed with careful step by step planning. This suggests that listening activities move from the simple to the more complex ones; that the learners know what the activities are and are given directions as to "what to listen for, where to listen, when to listen, and how to listen."

3. Listening comprehension structure should demand active overt student participant. That is, the most overt student participant includes his written answer to listening comprehension material and immediate feedback on performance helps keep learners' interest and motivation.

4. Listening comprehension lessons should provide a communicative necessity for remembering to develop concentration. This necessity should come from the lesson. This is done by giving the learners the writing assignment before they listen to the material.

5. Listening comprehension lessons should emphasize conscious memory work. One of the objective of listening is to strengthen the learners' immediate recall to increase their memory spans. It means that listening is receiving, receiving needs thinking, and thinking needs memory; there is no way to separate listening, thinking, remembering.

6. Listening comprehension lessons should "teach" not "test." It means that the goal of checking the learners' responses should be viewed only as feedback, as a way of allowing the learners understand how they did and how they are progressing. There should be no pass/fail attitude related with the correction of the exercises.

7. Conclusion

The ability to understand the spoken language has an important role in second language learning and use. It is a necessary skill for classroom real communication activities. It is a skill for oral communication between native and nonnative speakers. With guidance and practice, learners can improve their listening comprehension skills. Language teachers should respond to their learners' need to develop increased listening comprehension skills by making listening comprehension an integral component of their instructional sequence. Through this paper, the researcher 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 select listening texts that are produced 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 anxiety and provide a good basis for becoming independent learners who can effectively use the listening process for learning.

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