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## **IMPROVING ESL LEARNERS' LISTENING SKILLS**

Listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning despite the recognition of the critical role it plays both in communication and in language acquisition. According to W.M. Rivers' findings through the normal course of a day, listening is used nearly twice as much as speaking and four to five times as much as reading and writing [1, p.71].

Some of the reasons for the lack of research interest may come from the fact that speaking was always considered a more "valuable" skill to focus on in the classroom; that researchers and teachers have often considered that listening was something which could just be "picked up"; and as researchers and teachers had not been taught listening themselves, they saw little need for developing a specific research agenda or approaches to teaching listening.

Although listening has been a relatively neglected skill in terms of research and how it is introduced to language learners, it is now beginning to receive more attention. There is now a greater awareness among teachers that they have to help learners develop their listening skills, rather than rely on the skill developing itself.

The question of how to help learners develop effective listening skills brings attention to the methods the teachers use and the type of materials introduced to learners. The aim of all listening lessons should be to allow learners a greater degree of independence when confronted with listening to the foreign language in a real world context, and that means using authentic texts. Authentic texts are any spoken texts which have not been specially prepared for language learners, and they are often delivered via technologies like radio, television/video, and the Internet or CD-ROM.

One of the main advancements to come out of research into listening strategies was the understanding that listening exercises could be divided into three main parts: Pre-listening, While-listening, Post-listening activities. This format has proved useful in taking the attention off continually testing listening and has allowed learners to do other things with the information that they listen to. For instance, a teacher can initiate a short discussion with the learners in the pre-listening stage as to what they think of the topic before they listen to the text (activating world and personal knowledge). Then the learners can be asked to use whatever information they gathered from a text to have an extended discussion in a post-listening stage (allowing for more individualization and critical comments to be developed). In between these two stages, learners can be helped to focus on their listening by careful selection of tasks that are meaningful and that cater to developing specific listening skills rather than on constantly measuring performance through test-like exercises.

Using real-time radio in class is one of the more easily accessible forms of authentic listening practice we can give our learners. The airwaves are filled with programs twenty-four hours per day, and the low cost of radios means that most language teachers can obtain a radio and take it to class. Radio stations such as BBC World Service (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA) are constantly on-air.

Meanwhile, many non-English speaking countries also broadcast some programs, or even have dedicated stations, in English. Although radios are easy to access, they are perhaps the most difficult of aural texts for language learners to listen to. The reason for this is that all non-verbal information is missing, information which can aid in helping understand the message, and the learner has to focus on the skill which is most difficult for him or her – listening.

In order to use radio programs with learners teachers need to select a program at a suitable time for their class and decide on some global listening tasks for the learners. For instance, with an intermediate group of learners about to listen to a radio program on travel we might adopt the following procedure:

Stage 1: Pre-Listening Task Today we are going to listen to a travel program on the radio for ten minutes. Before we listen, who has made a trip recently? Where did you go? What did you see?

The radio guide tells us in that this program is about Egypt. What do you know about Egypt? What would you like to know about Egypt? What kind of information do you think the presenter will give us?

Stage 2: While-Listening Task While you listen to the program, try to listen for the main things the presenter recommends doing while in Egypt. Don't try to write anything down, only listen to the program and see how much you can understand.

Stage 3: Post-Listening Task In groups of three have a short discussion about what you heard from the program. Would you like to go to Egypt based on what you just heard? Why or why not?

In using the radio in the way suggested here we allow learners access to native speaker models, something which might be missing from their normal classroom experiences. Also, we place the focus on extensive listening for pleasure and take the emphasis off testing what the learners hear (that is why we ask the learners not to write while they listen).

Using television or videos in the classroom allows the learners access to more information when listening. That is, the learners can now see what is happening as well as listen to the text. Non-verbal behavior or paralinguistic features of the spoken text are now available to the learners (compared with radio), so learners can develop their listening skills in a richer language context.

Many language learners watch movies/ videos outside of class time, but few of them consider this as an opportunity to develop their listening skills (perhaps because they become used to reading the sub-titles of English movies). Watching a movie/a video is considered as entertainment and often “doesn't count” in terms of learning. We can, however, in the language classroom, sensitize our learners to how they can make use of movies to help them develop their second language listening skills.

There has been a rapid increase in the development of the Internet facilities and CD-ROMs. This has been prompted, partly, by the more powerful computers we have these days and has been partly driven by the users' demands for more interesting and innovative applications of the technology. We are able to direct our learners to sites

on the Internet where they can practice their listening as long as they have access to the appropriate computer hardware.

There are several benefits computer software has over radio or television. For instance, many CD-ROMs now have glossaries and online scripts, so that when problems are encountered, the learners can get online help. In addition to this, many younger learners wish to learn or use their computer skills nowadays, so the prospect of developing computer skills along with developing their language skills may seem attractive to these learners. With an advanced group of learners we might consider having extended critical and creative discussion about the news:

Stage 1: Pre-Listening Task Tomorrow in class we will have some discussion about what's in the news. In order to do this I would like you do access at least two of the following websites: <http://www.bbc.co.uk>, <http://www.avoa.gov> or <http://npr.org> (National Public Radio) and listen to different versions of the main stories.

Once you are in the website you can choose audio or video presentations. You can also look for related items. Just surf around until you feel you have collected enough information for our discussion in class.

Stage 2: While-Listening Task Students may either work at home or in a computer lab at university to collect the information they require.

Stage 3: Post-Listening Task (the next class) First I would like you to sit in groups according to one of the websites you visited. So let's have a group of BBC listeners/viewers, one of VOA, and one of NPR to begin with. In your groups discuss what the main news stories were. Only exchange information at this stage. Now change groups and have one person for each website in groups of three. Explain to the other members in your group the main stories in the order they were presented on the Web. Then discuss your reaction to these stories. Consider how important you think the item is, what angle the broadcast company took when presenting the stories, and what this story means to you personally. This use of the Internet and computer technology integrates several authentic activities for the learners and widens the scope of developing listening skills. In addition to this, learners are now given more autonomy over their language learning and the links between classroom and real-world learning becomes more obvious to them.

In a nutshell, with the increased awareness of the need to help second-language learners develop effective listening skills and with the greater availability of technology nowadays, teachers are able to explore more creative ways of teaching listening in and out of the class using authentic materials. Once we begin to explore the possibilities, a few of which are outlined here, we offer a richer language learning experience for our learners and create good listeners.

## REFERENCES

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