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LISTENING IS THE MOTHER OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

Abstract

This paper focuses on the importance of listening in language learning process, as listening is considered the mother of language learning. So far, in Indian school system, the language learning process is reversed. Instead of LSRW it is WRSL which neglects the role of listening entirely. Language learning starts with listening which helps the learner get familiarized with the sound, pronunciation and style of the target language. It begins with listening as in the case of a child who keeps listening and then tries to speak and reading and writing happens at a later stage. That's why the order of language learning is always LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). This paper brings out the importance of continuous listening of the target language to get familiarized with the frequently used words in the target language to be used in day today conversations. It also stresses on the need for an active listening and setting follow-up activities based on the listened input.

Keywords: Importance of listening, Language learning process, Second language learning, Target language, Listening skill.

Introduction

It has always remained a puzzle for teachers of second language why the students were not able to acquire the second language even after 12 years of learning it in their school life. The reason for that is very simple, they were always asked to read and write and most of the time it's about learning grammar. Students develop aversion towards the target language because of the grammar oriented classrooms. A lot has changed in the language learning process but most of the Indian schools teach English as a subject to score marks and the teachers focus on the text book which consists of more reading and writing tasks.

Osada (2004) expressed that listening skill didn't receive sufficient acceptance in its own right but rather has been considered as a passive skill that will develop without help. Listening was almost zero in English classrooms because of lack of Language Labs. In most of the schools, even English is taught in the respective first languages thus the classroom listening is also neglected.

Learning a foreign language is commonly considered as speaking that language, and learners are enamored with speaking the language immediately. However, listening is prerequisite to developing other language skills; it should precede speaking, reading, and writing (Devine, 1982; Wolvin & Coakley, 1988). Language learning always starts with listening and it's not just about listening but listening continuously and actively for style, pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence formation. Most of the time, there is a misunderstanding that listening happens only in the language lab. This paper analyses and proposes few techniques for listening to speed up the second language learning. Rest of the paper is organized as follows, Literature Review, Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions.

Literature Review

Listening is a process and it incorporates certain components for active 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). Listening is all about discriminating the differences and similarities in the target language and one's mother tongue. It's also about

training the ear to the target language because at first when listening to a new language it would look as if we are listening to gibberish. Listening always promotes language learning and speeds up the process of language learning.

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). Listening helps the listener learn about the nature of the target language in terms of pace, intonation and speech variations.

According to Morley (2001) and Rost (2001), listening is the most important skill for language learning because it can be mostly used in normal daily life and develops faster than the other language skills. In communication skills it's about listening and understanding before someone can answer in the target language. It's listening that helps one in communicate effectively than the other skills in their day today life.

Postovsky (1975, p.19) said, "Listening ranges in meaning from sound discrimination to aural comprehension (i.e., actual understanding of the spoken language)." It's about discriminating the sounds first rather than comprehension because in the school set-up it's always about reading and comprehending and listening and comprehending in a structured set-up. Language learning should help one comprehend and infer information in any situation not just in exam halls.

O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989) stated that listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener construes meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge (p. 434). One of the important thing in listening is video based listening, so that the listener can connect the actions and words thus increase the chances of learning the language effectively.

Rost (2009) told that listening is an active mental ability. It's important in language learning that the listener is interested in listening otherwise it would be only hearing. Most of the listening sessions, students are not able to perform well because of the external and internal distractions that prevents them from listening.

Weinrauch & Swanda Jr. (1975) suggest listening is the most important form of communication, yet it is still frequently ignored; "probably more attention should be directed to the subject of listening. Both students and the businessmen may need to further recognize the importance of

this communicative function” (p. 27). It’s very obvious that listening both in academic set-up and business set-up is really important but it’s been ignored for a long time. This is true in language learning too because anyone who listens regularly to a target language will acquire it even without the help of a teacher.

According to Lindsay and Knight, people have four different purposes when they listen: We listen for a purpose, but this purpose can be very different depending on the situation: listening for specific details, listening for general meaning, listening for the general idea or gist. There is also a difference between listening: for information; for enjoyment or social reasons; to learn new language (2006: 46). This paper focuses on the role of listening in learning a new language. The skill level happens at the end of it because learning basics of a language is more important in the beginning.

Discussion points

This paper discusses the following points to strengthen the argument it puts forth. They are as follows,

- 1) Learner’s Motivation & Interest
- 2) Listening Actively
- 3) Listening Continuously
- 4) Listening repeatedly
- 5) Listening for Vocabulary
- 6) Listening for Pronunciation
- 7) Listening for the accent of the target language
- 8) Importance of maintaining the order of LSRW

1) Learner’s Motivation & Interest

Ellis (1994), in an overview of research on motivation, simply asserted that motivation affects the extent to which language learners persevere in learning, what kinds of behavior they exert, and their actual achievement. It’s clear that a learner’s motivational level will decide how far they will go in terms of acquiring the fluency level in the target language. Language is best learnt

when the learner is interested in learning the target language. The language teachers has got an important role in setting the mindset and kindling the interest of the learners before taking them for any activities in the target language. Lack of interest could be due to many reasons such as societal pressure as in Tamilnadu where learning any other language is considered as a sin, family background where the learner could be the first literate, school background where there are different boards of studies such as state, metric, central etc. and fear of learning something new.

Wlodowski explained motivation as “the processes that can (a) arouse and instigate behavior, (b) give direction or purpose to behavior, (c) continue to allow behavior to persist, and (d) lead to choosing or preferring a particular behavior” (1985, p. 2). As the saying goes “Well begun is half done”, if the attitude and perception is set right at the beginning of language learning, it would speed-up the rest of the processes. There will be always a fear of something new which has to be approached and clarified at the earliest possible stage. The family background, board background and societal perceptions should be explained carefully before taking them to the language learning. This counseling process will help the teachers a lot during the time of listening to a new language.

2) Listening Actively

In its essence, to listen actively means listening for total meaning, responding to feelings, and paying attention to all cues (Rogers and Farson, 1957). Most of the Indian classrooms are crowded at an average of 50 students in a single classroom where listening actively becomes very difficult. Active listening needs an interesting listening material. Most of the time audio is played for listening but it has become more difficult in the language labs to keep the students interested in the listening activity with the help of audio files.

Basically, “active listening” requires the listener to capture what the sender is communicating from the sender’s point of view (Rogers and Farson, 1957). Introducing video files is the key in keeping the interest of the learners intact but not all the learners will like the same video so it’s important to create a video bank in the language lab and ask the students to choose the video of

their choice thus the interest could be retained. One good thing about video enabled listening is that the learners can connect words and actions.

Very rare, indeed, is the study that systematically manipulates listening skills and tests their impact on relevant outcomes (Hutchby, 2005). To ensure whether someone is listening actively is a difficult task, so a follow-up task can be attached. The best thing to do is to ask the students to make notes as they listen and complete a write-up using those notes for a page. They could be even asked to talk on the listened content for 1 to 3 minutes. All other skills naturally follow listening.

Trying to keep distortion at a minimum, the listener has to continuously validate the accuracy of understanding (Gordon, 1977), whereby “active listening” captures also the feelings that come with what is said. Listening never stops with the language lab or a smart classroom but it should be extended to wherever it is possible to listen to the target language for enhancing the basic idea of the language. It could be very well extended to home in the form of documentaries, movies and TV programmes in the target language. One thing the learner needs to be aware of is to make sure that the programme they watch should be interesting to them.

Having emphasized this, let us turn to the component techniques commonly used in active listening: paraphrasing (restating), verbalizing emotions, asking, summarizing, clarifying, encouraging, and balancing (Decker, 1989). Although all these components happen at a later stage, they may be considered as important elements of active listening as the learner progresses.

3) Listening Continuously

There is a common misunderstanding about language learning that it's a onetime thing but it's not. Language learning should be continuous; especially, the process of listening should be continuous. Unless the learner is in the country where the target language is spoken, the learner should listen for atleast two hours a day to keep in touch with the target language. If one needs to listen to something continuously, it should be interesting. Anything which is not interesting is not going to last long. One type of video won't suit everyone; some like comedy videos, some like action movies, some like to watch news while others like to watch documentaries.

Underwood says, “Many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty in listening comprehension as opposed to reading comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks” (Underwood, 1989, p.16). This problem of adjusting to the speed can be achieved only through continuous listening. Both the mind and the ears will be trained on the target language if it is continuously listened.

Classroom is a best source of listening only if the teacher’s language is good enough and the teacher teaches the lessons in the target language but in reality, it’s not true. Although the medium of instruction is English in most of the schools and colleges all the subjects, even English is taught in the respective regional languages. This blocks the continuity in listening the target language.

4) Listening repeatedly

The number of commonly used words is limited to 1000 in most of the languages. So, it’s really important that learners watch the same interesting video or listen to the audio multiple times to ensure that they are able to follow the conversation or narration without much difficulty. The ears need to be trained on the target language and the learners can pause the video to go back and check the meaning of certain repeated words that they come across in the target language. Repeating a video several times at times might be boring but it’s perseverance that will play a major role in language acquisition, especially, in listening.

When one starts listening more than once to the same material, the understanding of the same will improve exponentially. This is applicable not only with a new language but also with one’s mother tongue, too. In reading we call this phenomenon as reading between the lines. With listening, it’s listening between the words and lines. Listening continuously is for understanding the language’s sound system and for familiarizing with the words but listening repeatedly is for understanding the meaning of the listened information.

Most of the students haven’t realized the importance of repeated listening. They just complain that they have already watched it. Students in the schools and colleges are concerned, it’s about how much they complete in terms of number of materials, rather than how well they have attained the outcome of that particular task.

5) Listening for Vocabulary

The importance of building enough vocabulary in learning a new language shouldn't be underestimated because one can communicate with words coupled with actions. Listening is a very good exercise that will give ample opportunity to the learner for learning not only new words but also how they are used in sentences and conversations. We normally practice this while reading because reading is what we do in our own pace but listening it keeps moving and unless it's listened more than once the words cannot be learnt or retained for future use. They will always look new to us.

At times learners learn new words directly from the dictionary. They memorize the words and find it difficult to use them in day today conversations. This could be avoided if they learn words from the listened input. The chances are more that they will remember the same words when they hear it in a different scenario. The retention and relating rate will be more through listening than through any other activities as listening through a video will be coupled with action for most of the words. As humans, we understand sign languages far better than anyone else in the world. So, video materials will provide ample opportunity to the learner to understand words through signs or actions.

6) Listening for Pronunciation

One difficulty a language learner will face is pronunciation. Only listening can help the learner overcome this issue. All the above said suggestions will take care that we get used with the target language but in order to produce those speech sounds need enough effort from the learners. This may require lots of tongue twisting activities as the previous stages trained the ears and built the knowledge about the target language. Pronunciation is a productive skill as against the receptive skill of listening. It's about training the tongue and vocal cards to the target language by repeatedly listening to those words and repeating them aloud.

All the languages have their own pronunciation or the sound system of the language. It's very unique to each language and their tongues and vocal cards are trained or used only to their mother tongues. So training oneself in a new language in the exact way the words are pronounced by the native speaker is a biggest challenge and it is almost impossible. One may pronounce individual words very close to the native speaker but while speaking casually the learner's mother tongue influence will be an unavoidable factor. Listening exercises come handy

to help the learner in practicing the pronunciation of the words. There should be a continuity and scope for practice in real time whatever they learnt individually with the help of the listening exercises.

7) Listening for the accent of the target language

The important thing about listening is the accent of the listened material. English, especially has got multiple accents all over the world, similarly, every language has many accents within that country or region where the language is spoken. Many a times, listening to the native accent of the target language becomes more difficult in the initial stage. In India, most people are comfortable with Indian English because most of us are used with Indian English in schools, colleges and society.

Initially it might be alright but unlearning will be the biggest problem in the future if one wants to improve their language style because we might have already learnt an accent. So it is better if the learner chooses to listen to the listening inputs that are in the native accent. So the ears, tongue and vocal cords will get trained well.

8) Importance of maintaining the order of LSRW

Last but not the least, the order of the skills does matter. It's always LSRW, the natural way of learning a language. Unfortunately, invariably in most of the language learning classes the process is reversed and it's WRSL. Listening is given the least importance although people started paying importance to listening at the end of the 20th century with the advent of the language labs. It's always about grammar, writing and reading and not about listening and speaking. Listening comes last in the skill basket. As technology develops, learners are not in a mood to listen. Listening has become one of the bitter components of language learning.

The order of LSRW is called the natural language acquisition. It's how the first language is acquired right from childhood. Somehow in second language learning, this process is reversed and it always starts with writing. It's time that listening gets its rightful place in the world of languages.

Recommendations & Conclusion

Listening in general is a skill and it needs the listener's willingness for the listened input to have its effect. The inquisitiveness which we carried during our childhood to listen to everything and kept asking questions to our parents is lost when it comes to learning a second language, especially when it is given to all as part of the curriculum. The attitude of the learners is changing and they are at a fast paced era where spending time for listening patiently becomes very difficult. If the environment where they study, adopts English which is the medium of instruction in most of the schools, amount of time they listen to the target language becomes more. Teachers of other subjects should also teach and interact with the students in English. If someone hasn't understood something, they could meet the teacher outside the classroom and clarify things. It needs lots of commitment and language enhancement from the teaching fraternity of other subject as well.

Listening is the mother of language learning and this paper concludes that if someone has the habit of listening to other languages and they are really interested in learning that language then they don't need a faculty because language is not a subject to be taught by a teacher, instead it's a natural phenomenon and it happens naturally with little effort.

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