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COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING LISTENING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Ability to understand a person speaking a foreign language is a crucial skill in any communication. According to researchers, it is listening that is considered to be the most common communication activity in daily life. Researchers commonly cite the data obtained by J. Morley (Morley, 1991, p. 82), who claims that “we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write.” M.E. Wilt found out that people listen 45 percent of the time they spend communicating, while 30 percent of communication time is spent speaking, 16 percent reading, and 9 percent writing (Wilt, 1950). All these facts make listening skill the most important aspect in teaching any foreign language. Listening is a skill to be taught, with concomitant strategies to help L2 learners be successful (Berne, 2004).

However, in our modern system of teaching English as a foreign language listening skill is quite often ignored. In some schools or university departments students hardly ever hear the sound of a recorded voice of a native speaker. In others, listening is only tested once in a blue moon, but not trained extensively enough. David Nunan commented that listening is the “Cinderella Skill” which is overlooked by its elder sister “speaking” in second language learning (Nunan, Miller, 1995).

Communicative approach in ESL. Communicative language teaching is based on a number of typical features of the communication process (Littlewood, 1981). Language learning is understood as learning to communicate through communication. The emphasis is put on the meaningful and motivated use of language by the people who communicate in order to achieve a certain goal. Language for learning is derived from communicative experience in a variety of

real world situations. Fluency is put over accuracy. Interactive learning is encouraged as the way towards acquiring communication skills. The learners are taught to “negotiate the meaning” (working towards better understanding each other), and “using communication strategies” (e.g. circumlocution).

Communicative approach is closely connected to the Natural Approach by S. Krashen which puts emphasis on the exposure to language rather than formal exercises (Krashen, 1981). According to this approach, only natural-like acquisition can result in mastering the language while “learning” helps getting the knowledge about the language, but not gaining real communication skills. We all know that our school pupils “learn” the language for about 10 years but very few graduates can really communicate after they leave school. That happens mostly because they learn a lot “about” the language and do formal exercises in the textbooks, but do not get enough exposure to the real language and have very little practice of the main communicative skills, listening being one of the most significant of them.

The key concept of communicative approach is the “communicative competence” which encompasses the knowledge of how to use the language in the real world, without which the rules of grammar would be useless (Hymes, 1971). Communicative competence breaks down into the two major components of the knowledge: knowledge of the language and knowledge of how to achieve the goal of communication.

What is involved in the listening skill?

Listening is an extremely complicated skill which involves a number of cognitive procedures. Epictetus, a Greek sage and Stoic philosopher once said: “We were given two ears but only one mouth, because listening is twice as hard as talk-

ing”. As McDonough and Shaw (1993) and Rost (1991) explain, a listener as a processor of language has to go through three processes using three types of skills (Saha, Talukdar, <http://www.articlesbase.com/languages-articles/teaching-listening-as-an-english-language-skill-367095.html>):

1. Processing sound / Perception skills: As the complete perception doesn't emerge from only the source of sound, listeners segment the stream of sound and detect word boundaries, contracted forms, vocabulary, sentence and clause boundaries, stress on longer words and effect on the rest of the words, the significance of intonation and other language-related features, changes in pitch, tone and speed of delivery, word order pattern, grammatical word classes, key words, basic syntactic patterns, cohesive devices etc.

2. Processing meaning / Analysis skills: it's a very important stage in the sense, as researches show, that syntax is lost to memory within a very short time whereas meaning is retained for much longer. While listening, listeners categorize the received speech into meaningful sections, identify redundant material, keep hold of chunks of the sentences, think ahead and use language data to anticipate what a speaker may be going to say, accumulate information in the memory by organizing them and avoid too much immediate detail.

3. Processing knowledge and context / Synthesis skills: ‘context’ refers to physical setting, the number of listener and speakers, their roles and their relationship to each other while ‘linguistic knowledge’ refers to their knowledge of the target language brought to the listening experience. Every context has its individual frame of reference, social attitude and topics. So, members of a particular culture have particular rules

of spoken behavior and particular topic which instigate particular understanding. Listening is thought as “interplay” between language and brain which requires the “activation of contextual information and previous knowledge” where listeners guess, organize and confirm meaning from the context.

In real life any communicator in a foreign language may expect to come across two types of listening: reciprocal or interactive (dialogues, phone conversations) and non-reciprocal or non-interactive (radio, TV, films, songs) when there is no chance to ask for repetition. Taking in the account all the above mentioned aspects, teaching listening in the classroom communicatively (i.e. through communication and for developing communicative competence) has to be built in two directions: teaching listening as a cognitive skill and practicing listening typical for real life communication. Let us dwell on each of them in detail.

Teaching listening efficiently. Teaching listening as a cognitive skill mostly deals with teaching students to recognize what they hear. The teacher has to anticipate possible problems and deal with them in the classroom. These issues might include: unknown words and structures (are they essential or non-essential, can be derived from the context or not); additional meaning expressed through stress and intonation: (I **CAN'T** see you tomorrow. I can't see you **TOMORROW**); teaching aspects of fast speech (the average speed of a radio monologue is 160 words per minute, while in a conversation it can reach 220); natural conversations grammar (ellipsis); some aspects in pronunciation in fast speech (the rules of linking of words, elision, assimilation). Practicing listening means constant exposure to the sound of foreign speech in different forms since only practice makes perfect.

In this connection, using authentic materials and situations are especially useful. Authentic materials and situations prepare students for the types of listening they will need to do when using the language outside the classroom (NCLRC, <http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/index.htm>). They may include:

- public address announcements (airports, train/bus stations, stores);
- radio and television programs;
- speeches and lectures;
- telephone customer service recordings.

In order to make an efficient listening lesson, every teacher should bear in mind the following aspects (Hymes, 1971, p. 6):

1. Appropriate level of the material, it should be challenging but not overwhelming (if students understand 70–90% after 3–4 times, it is good); the material should be interesting and appropriate for the class level in topic, speed and vocabulary. Some guidelines for judging the relative ease or difficulty of a listening text for a particular purpose or particular group of students might be:

a. The selected material must be relevant to student's real life; language of the text should be authentic and would vary in terms of learners' interest and age group.

b. The storyline, narrative, or instruction should confirm common expectation in organization. It may contain main idea, details, and examples. An informative title might also be helpful.

c. Learners have to be familiar with the topic. They might feel major comprehension difficulties because of misapplication of background knowledge due to cultural differences.

2. Every listening should have a purpose – once students know what they are listening for, they are able to hear the answer accurately;

3. Interesting procedure; most texts should have visual supports like clippings, maps, diagrams, pictures or images in video that contextualize the listening input and provide clues to meaning in order to aid their interpretation. Playing the text 2–3 times might be required in respect of the types of texts. In case of no chance of repetition, learners may become anxious about catching it all the first time and that will impede their actual performance.

4. Follow up (home task is a must).

According to majority researches in the methods of teaching listening, the following pattern of a listening lesson is supposed to be the most efficient.

Pre-listening Stage: preparation or warm-up for listening in several ways. These function as 'reference' and 'framework' by giving prior knowledge of listening activities. Some recommended pre-listening activities include:

- Introducing the topic and assessing their background knowledge of the topic or content of the material through commenting on a picture or photograph.
- Activating their existing knowledge through discussion. Reading through comprehension questions in advance, working out own opinion on a topic, predicting content from the title etc. can be done.
- Clarifying any necessary contextual information and vocabulary to comprehend the text. In this regard showing pictures maps or graphs and may be helpful.
- Informing them of the type of text, their role, purposes of the listening etc. A short reading passage on a similar topic may help them.
- Do a predicting activity before listening, and remind students to review what they are hearing to see if it makes sense in the context of their prior knowledge and what they already know of the topic or events of the passage.

While-Listening Stage: activities in this stage must follow the learners' specific needs, instructional goal, listening purposes and learners' proficiency level. While listening activities directly relate to the text and listeners are asked to do these during or immediately after listening. Key points:

- If the students are asked to give written information after listening, they should have chance to listen the text more than once which makes it easier for them to keep concentration while listening with specific purposes.
- Writing activities should be to a minimum. As comprehension is the prime target, writing would make the listening more demanding.
- Global activities like getting the main idea, topic, setting, summary that focus on the content and forms of the text should be given more so that listeners are guided through the text. Listening for the gist is such an activity.
- More questions should be set up in order to focus student's attention on the crucial elements that might help to comprehend the text. Following the route on a map or searching for specific clues to meaning, or identify description of the given pictures might be appropriate here.
- Attaching predicting activities before listening so that students can monitor their comprehension as they listen. Listening with visuals may serve here.
- Giving immediate feedback to make the students examine their responses and how it was. Checking off items in a list, distinguishing between formal and informal registers conducted by teacher are examples here.

Listening activities here become varied according to their purposes and objectives. Four major distinctions include: Attentive listening, Extensive listening, Intensive listening, Selective listening

and Interactive listening (Saha, Talukdar, <http://www.articlesbase.com/languages-articles/teaching-listening-as-an-english-language-skill-367095.html>).

Attentive listening: attentiveness is a prior condition for understanding and listener often lapse attention for various reasons. Losing interest, inability to keep up with, losing track of goals, less confident are some of them. Teacher can help the listeners to hold their attention. Activities in this stage would be interesting and easy including face to face interaction, using visual and tangible topics, clear description of the listening procedure, minimum use of written language, and immediate and ongoing responses etc. so that learners can easily keep pace with the text and activity.

Listening to short chunks, music image, personal stories, teacher- talk, small question- answer, and interview etc. may be applied in this stage.

Extensive listening: this type of listening has also a greater ease than other types as it is concerned to promote overall comprehension of a text and never requires learners to follow every word and understand them. Learners need to comprehend the text as a whole which is called global understanding.

At the lower level they may have problems to organize the information, so some non-verbal forms in responding might be given such as putting pictures in a right sequence, following directions on a map, checking of items in a photograph, completing a grid, chart or timetable etc.

At the developed stage, some language based tasks requiring constructing meaning, inferring decisions, interpreting text and understanding gist are usually recommended. Completing cloze exercises or giving one or two word answers, multiple choices, predicting the next utterances, forming connected sets of

notes, inferring opinions, or interpreting parts of the text are some samples.

Intensive listening: 'hearing clearly' is also a prime aspect of listening as it includes accurate perception without which the second phase of processing meaning becomes very difficult. Listening intensively is quite important to understand the language form of the text as we have to understand both the lexical and grammatical units that lead to form meaning. So, intensive listening requires attention to specific items of language, sound or factual detail such as words, phrase, grammatical units, pragmatic units, sound changes (vowel reduction and consonant assimilation), stress, intonation and pauses etc. Feedback on accuracy and repetition on the teacher's part promote success here.

Paraphrasing, remembering specific words and sequences, filling gaps with missing words, identifying numbers and letters, picking out particular facts, discriminating the pronunciation of same phoneme in different positions, replacing words, finding stress and boundaries are some good intensive listening practice.

Selective listening: it involves listening to selected part of a text, as its name suggests, to predict information and select 'cues' surrounding information. Thus, the listeners may have an assessment of their development in listening to authentic language. Here the focus is on the main parts of the discourse and by noticing these parts listener construct their understanding of the meaning of whole of the text through inferring. As the expectation on understanding is focused and has a purpose, in these activities, listeners have the chance of second listening to check understanding and have feedback repeatedly.

Listening to sound sequences, documentary, story maps, incomplete monologues, conversation cues and topic

listening are examples of selective listening.

Interactive listening: this is a very advanced stage of listening practice as it implies social interaction in small groups which is a 'true test' of listening. In interactive listening, learners, either in pairs or in groups, receive new information, identify them continuously. Besides, they have to work out the problems of understanding each other and formulate responses immediately as we are required to do in real life. So, in spite of calling 'practice', this goes beyond of it. As this phase involves both comprehension and production, it directly promotes speaking skill. Teachers have a central role in this stage. They have to set up specific goals so that learners can assess their own performance, observe learners' language in order to provide immediate feedback on their interaction strategies.

Group survey, self-introductions, short speeches, chatting and discussing, exchanging news and views, interviewing and being interviewed etc. might be appropriate here.

After-listening Stage: post listening activities can be used to check comprehension, evaluate listening skill, and use the knowledge gained to other contexts. So, these are called listening exercises at all and defined as 'follow-up works.' The features of these activities are:

- Related to pre-listening activities, such as predicting.
- May create a real life situation where students might be asked to use knowledge gained through listening.
- May extend the topic and help the students remember new vocabulary.

Using notes made while listening in order to write a summary, reading a related text, doing a role play, writing on the same theme, studying new grammatical structures, practicing pronunciation, discussion group, craft project etc. are some post-listening activities.

Let us suggest some more activities that can be used to make listening in the classroom more efficient in terms of developing communicative competence.

1. *Listening and Performing Actions and Operations*: drawing a picture, figure, or design; locating routes of specific points on a map; selecting or identifying a picture of a person, place, or thing from description; performing hand or body movements as in songs and games; operating a piece of equipment, such as a camera, a recorder, a microwave oven, a pencil sharpener; carrying out steps in a process, such as steps solving a math problems, a science experiment, a cooking sequence.

2. *Listening and Transferring Information*: listening and taking a telephone or in-person message by either transcribing the entire message word-for-word or by writing down notes on the important items; listening and filling in blanks in a gapped story game (in order to complete the story); listening and completing a form or chart; listening and summarizing the gist of a short story, report, or talk; listening to a «how to» talk and writing an outline of the steps in a sequence (e.g. how to cook something, how to run a piece of equipment, how to play a game); listening to a talk or lecture and taking notes.

3. *Listening and Solving Problems*: word games in which the answers must be derived from verbal clues; classroom versions of password, jeopardy, twenty questions in which careful listening is critical to questions and answers or answers and questions; "minute mysteries" in which a paragraph-length mystery story is given by the teacher (or a tape), followed by small group work in which students formulate solutions; a jigsaw mystery in which each group listens to a tape with some of the clues, then shares information in order to solve the mys-

tery; riddles, logic puzzles, intellectual problem-solving.

4. *Listening, Evaluation, and Manipulating Information*: evaluating information in order to make a decision or construct a plan of action; evaluating arguments in order to develop a position for or against; evaluating cause-and-effect information; projecting from information received and making predictions; summarizing or “gistizing” information received; evaluating and elaborating or extending information; organizing unordered information received into a pattern of orderly relationship – chronological sequencing, spatial relationships, cause-and-effect, problem-solution.

5. *Interactive Listening and Negotiating Meaning Through Questioning/Answering Routines*: repetition: Could you repeat the part about ...?; paraphrase: Could you say that again? I don’t understand what you mean by...; verification: Did I understand you to say that...? In other words you mean.... Do you mean ...?; clarification: Could you tell me what you mean by ...? Could you explain...? Could you give us an example of ...?; challenge: What did you base ... on? How did you reach...? Why did you...?

6. *Listening for Enjoyment*: listening to songs, stories, plays, poems, jokes, anecdotes, etc.

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