

Assessing the Impact of Linguistic Environments on the Acquisition of Listening Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

Listening is one of the most important skills in learning and teaching second language, but the importance of listening in language learning has only recognized recently (Oxford, 1993). Since the role of listening comprehension in language learning was taken for granted, it merited little research and pedagogical attention. Second language listening comprehension is a complex process, crucial in the development of second language competence. In daily or academic communications, listening contributes communicative success. In fact, most learners feel dislike learning this skill and fall most of the communication. They cannot match what the speakers say with what their prior knowledge. The fact that language environment plays an important role in improving learners' language skills and communication competence. It means that students need to use English they learn in daily communications to communicate with people around them. However, some countries learn English as foreign language like in Vietnam, English cannot be spoken in every daily conversation. Hence, this article will provide the understanding of listening skill as well as learners' problem when learning this skill. It also analyzes the effectiveness of language learning environment features in learning and teaching listening skill to help learners improve their listening skill and be a successful communicator.

Key words: listening, important skill, language environment features, effectiveness, communicator.

1 INTRODUCTION

Research has demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of communication time listening (Gilman & Moody, 1984). It is one of receptive skill which is useful for learners to be able to decode the meaning to understand the message. It means that we cannot develop speaking skill unless we also develop listening skill in order to have a successful conversation. Moreover, listening is an invisible metal, complex and active processes of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know. Listeners will distinguish between the sounds, understand vocabulary and grammar structure, interpret stress and intention, retain and deduce this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of utterance (Wipf, 1984). In fact, due to the limited exposure to English in high schools, the Vietnamese students were not prepared in aural skills when they came to the university; they did not have adequate listening ability to follow class instructions in English. It seems that the aural input that the students received was not in sufficient amount nor authentic. Many students had their own listening habits. Some of students often tried to understand each word or each sentence. Moreover, they were not selfconfident when they met some difficult and strange words or sentences because most of them were not used to listening to

natural English. As a result, they were not successful when they heard native speakers pronouncing the words they knew. Learners cannot match the words with the pronunciation and the intonation of the native speakers. They usually faced with the failure in the listening examinations and found difficulties in real communication with native speakers. In addition, listeners did not have a language environment to practice what they studied. It means that they learned English at schools, but they have never used English in daily conversations or dialogues regularly. As a result, listening to spoken English is an important way to acquiring the language of “picking up” structures and vocabulary. Thus, this article not only provides the understanding of listening skills; and learners’ difficulties in learning Listening skill but it also analyses the effectiveness of language environment features such as the context and the purpose of listening in order to apply some teaching Listening skill techniques to help learners improve their listening skill.

2 LISTENING SKILL

Listening, an ability to identify and understand what others is saying, is a process of the interpretation what learners hear with what they already know to understand what the speakers say. This involves understanding a speaker's accent and pronunciation, his grammar, and his vocabulary and grasping his meaning (Howatt and Dakin). In language learning there are different types of listening, which often appear as pairs of opposites, that is, in form of a dichotomy. Nunan (2001) introduced one such dichotomy: the reciprocal and non- reciprocal listening. Reciprocal listening refers to listening from both sides, that is, a conversation. Here a listener not only listens, but responds to a message, participates in a conversation and interacts, which further stimulates his learning process. Non-reciprocal listening, on the other hand, refers to the listening as a sole activity, deprived of any interaction. Here a learner listens in a situation where he is unable to respond, such as during formal lecture, or a radio transmission (Nunan, 23). Another listening dichotomy is introduced by Cook. There are two distinct processes involved in listening skills. Firstly, top down listening process, which is sometimes referred to as macro processing, involved activation of schematic knowledge and contextual knowledge (Marianne, 1995). Schematic knowledge is the background information on the topic, relevant socio _contextual knowledge and the knowledge of how discourse is organized with respect to different genres, different topic, or different purposes. It means that top-down knowledge process is to use the prior knowledge which can be the understanding of the topic, the environmental listening, the text type, the culture or other understanding of common situations around. Therefore, listeners use top - down process when they apply their prior knowledge to understand the meaning of the communication. On the other hand, hearers also use bottom - up processes when they apply linguistic knowledge to undertake the meaning of the message. It means that they use the knowledge of the language system that allow the listeners to segment and interpret the acoustic signal as sounds that form phrases or clauses with a unifying intonation contour, and phrases or clauses that form cohesive and coherent texts such that all levels of language analysis come into play (Marianne, 1995). Thus, learners can build meaning from lower level sounds to words to grammatical relationships to lexical meanings in order to arrive at the final message. However, listening comprehension is not either top - down or

bottom - up processing, but an interactive, interpretive process where listeners use both previous knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding the texts. However, the degree to which listeners use the one process or the other will depend on their knowledge of the language, familiarity with the topic and the purpose for listening. For example, listening for gist involves primarily top - down processing, whereas listening for specific information, as in weather broadcast, involves bottom - up processing to comprehend all the desired details.

In addition, Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Coakley (1982, 9) identified five types of listening

- Discriminative listening: allows individuals to separate fact, which is provable formation, from opinion, which is more subjective and ambiguous.

Comprehensive listening: is necessary for individuals to understand the message. This includes differentiating between vocal sounds in order to comprehend the emotional content of the message. Critical or evaluative listening: is used to evaluate a message before accepting rejecting it.

Therapeutic listening: allows the individual to listen without judging. The purpose of therapeutic listening is to help the speaker change or progress in some way.

Appreciative listening: allows individuals to listen for entertainment or enjoyment, such as when we listen to poetry or music.

As teachers, thus, we need to engage student to types of listening carefully to help them understand and evaluate the message effectively, Once the learner has defined his or her listening goals and absorbed the information, he or she will probably proceed to make judgements, and evaluations, sort information, find uses and application and discard or file the information for future reference (Prescott, Potter, and Frank, 1968).

2.1 Context

Listening, an important part of the language environment, is the most frequently used language skill in everyday life. Researchers (for example, Weaver 1972, Rivers, 1981, Morley, 1991) estimate that we listen twice as much as we speak, four time as much as we read, and five time as much as we write. However, during the listening processes, learners will face with several difficulties. The first difficulty in listening comprehension is that the context of listening. The environment of listening affects hearers' concentration so listening comprehension is more than extracting meaning from incoming speech. Besides, listening is a process of matching speech with what listeners already know about the topic. For instance, during the conversation, listeners may often listen to the whole conversation but their input is nearly about 40 50% of the content of the dialogue and they can combine with their general knowledge about the topic, they may guess what the speakers say. Moreover, the language environment contributes learners'

understanding of the meaning of the text. The language context may include circumstance, intonation, and stress, liking words or miscellaneous sounds. Hearers should have the awareness of the language environment then they can predict what they will hear in the topic. For example, as listening to the conversation happened at the airport, listeners may guess what they will hear such as the announcements or checking in order to get the main ideas or specific information of the communication. Therefore, when listeners know the context of a text or an utterance, the

process is facilitated considerably because listeners can activate prior knowledge and make the appropriate inferences essential to comprehending the message (Byrnes, 1984). Listeners use their knowledge of discourse to guess what they do not hear. Knowledge of stock phrases, of culture, social situation can help listeners understand spoken language. Listeners need to have an idea about the culture of language to understand it more clearly. Language teaching and culture go in hand and so teaching listening and culture do. In addition, when people communicate, a communicator has to listen and decode what a speakers say to continue a conversation in the discourse. As a result, when students learn listening skill, they need to know what real life situations are. According to Oscar (2017), there are some characteristics of real life situation that a teacher needs to elicit for students before they are going to listen. First of all, most of real life situations that we listen to are informal and spontaneous spoken discourse which has various interesting following features:

- Brevity of chunks: it is usually broken in short chunks

Pronunciation is often slurred, and noticeably different from phonological representation given in a dictionary *Vocabulary is often colloquial; in English you might for example, use 'guy' where in writing you should use 'man' or 'kid' or 'child'*

Grammar: informal speech tends to be somewhat ungrammatical: utterances do not usually divide neatly into sentences, a grammatical structure may change in midutterance, and unfinished clauses are common.

Noise: there will be a certain amount of 'noise', bits of the discourse that are unintelligible to the hearer, and therefore as far as he or she concerned are meaningless 'noise'

Redundancy: the speaker normally says a good deal more than is strictly necessary for conveying of the message.

Non-repetition: the discourse will not be repeated verbatim, normally it is heard only once, though this may be compensated for the redundancy of the discourse and by the possibility of requesting or explanation.

2.2 Purpose

Why do we listen? Communication experts (Wolvin & Coakley, 1985) specify five specific purposes: discriminative listening, comprehensive listening, critical listening, therapeutic listening and appreciative listening. Discriminative listening allows a listener to become sensitive to arguments and language and to distinguish fact from opinion. Comprehensive listening helps a listener to understand a message, which is requires in many instructional activities. Listeners should determine the speaker's purpose and then organize the spoken information so as to remember it. Critical listening involves paying attention, hearing, comprehending, analyzing, evaluating, and finally accepting or rejecting a message. Therapeutic listening enables the listener to serve as a sounding board, without evaluating or judging the message. Appreciative listening is carried on for enjoyment or satisfaction (Wolkin & Coakey, 1979). Moreover, depending on the degree of attention paid to the listening and the purpose in the mind of listeners, listening is categorized as follows:

- Casual listening: listening with no particular in mind and often without much concentration. Usually we do not listen very closely unless we hear something that particular interest us, afterward we may not remember much of what we heard. For example, we listen to the radio while doing homework or chatting with friends.

- Focused listening: listening for a particular purpose to find out information we need to know. We listen much more closely. For example, listen to a piece of important news on the radio.

In class, we are usually concerned with focused listening because we often tell the students what to expect and what to listen for before they start listening. It helps students be more focused on their listening and they will listen selectively. It can be done if teacher sets simple listening tasks before student listen because every clear task concerning with the content of listening will help learners gain the meaning of the text. Richards (1990) differentiates between an interactional and a transactional purpose. Interactional listening is highly two ways and contextual because the speakers interact with the listeners to satisfy the social needs of the participants such as small talks and casual conversation. Meanwhile, transactional listening is used primarily to communicate information such as news broadcasts and lectures. This requires accurate comprehension of a text with no opportunity for classification with a speaker (one way listening). Thus, knowing the purpose for listening clearly, listeners make an immediate response to what they hear.

3 LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING LISTENING SKILL

According to Oscar (2017), there are some problems that a learner might face with when listening such as troubles with sounds, having habit to understand every word, troubles with fast and natural native speech, having hard time to keep up and getting tired of listening. In my opinion, I agree with him and I would love to explain some more details about these problems that most students may face with as follow.

3.1 Troubles with sounds

Since most listeners rely mostly on context for comprehension, they do not often recognize some of sounds which are often slurred. So they will not understand what a speaker says.

3.2 Having habit to understand every word

This is a very common problem and the effort to understand everything often results in ineffective comprehension as well as feeling of fatigue and failure.

3.3 Having hard time to understand fast, natural native speech and to keep up

It naturally happens with all language learners when listening the native speakers. A speaker has a tendency to speak fast as using their mother tongue. As a learner do not recognize all language system: vocabulary or grammar who will have hard time to keep up listening to the end.

3.4 Get tired

As well as reading, if you don't understand what the passage is about, when you listen you will feel stress with all information. The interaction and transaction situation may make a listener get lost with amount of information they might hear in a minute. Then, a learner is easy to get tired and to give up on listening to the end.

4 HOW TO TEACH LISTENING SKILL?

According to the problems and the knowledge of listening processes, teachers should pay much attention in how and what will teach for students to learn listening skill effectively. It is important for teachers to know that listening is a language skill which involves a wide range of 'sub-skills'. It is more than simply hearing; it is 'decoding' sound and understanding the meaning behind those sounds. In my opinion, there are some ways to get students be ready for learning this skill.

Firstly, when teaching listening skill teachers need to help students learn some following

'subskills'. The first two 'sub skills' which is important for students to be able to decode the

meaning is to recognize differences between phonological e.g. students need to be able to notice a difference between /g/ and /k/ in the word pig and pick and to know comprehension of structures (part of speech sentences patterns, etc.). As a teacher, I think the problem with most listening classes is that we usually teach the language system and miss the skills of language. We provide students language knowledge such as knowledge of words, how the words are said in a word string, how the words are properly put in the order and how these words are strung together in longer text. For example, in the sentence, 'Would you please open the door?' the listener must notice that 'open' is the verb and 'door' is a noun. Besides, the listeners must recognize from the words order and intonation pattern that the sentence is a question. The next 'sub-skill' that involving in listening is to guess at unknown words or recognize words that are unnecessary for understanding. It means that the role of understanding context is very important. It is essential for teacher to brainstorm the context and get students understand the context setting for guessing what they are going to hear and ignore the unimportant words in the text. For example, in the sentence, 'The girl is wearing a giant hat.' the listener can guess at the meaning of word "giant" or just ignore it. Teacher, however, sometimes may forget to help students practice language knowledge. Our knowledge of the language system includes the knowledge of words, how these words are properly put in the order (syntax and grammar), how these words are said in a word string (phonology) and how these words are strung together in longer texts. Using the language system to understand or convey meaning and how we apply particular skills to understand and convey meaning. For instance, teachers can illustrate how differences of one sound in words, sentences, phrases and clauses by giving more examples or by letting students listen to more and find out the differences by themselves, then giving them the feedbacks. Secondly, in order to teach listening skills, teachers should firstly state the difficulties. For a foreign language, accurate and intelligent listening is a necessity; and the teachers are responsible to help the learners acquire this skill which provides the foundation for learning and functioning in a language. The teachers can observe and isolate the errors in speaking, but could not do in listening. In listening, the learners can listen to no controls over the structural and lexical range of the speaker to whom he is listening. However, any listener can learn to focus on significant content items to explain in another way he can learn to listen selectively. Besides, helping the learners to distinguish sounds, teaching to isolate significant content and informational items for concentration may be provided by controlled listening exercises. One exercise is to give him certain performance objectives to give him general

informational questions that he should be able to answer after he listens to the material for the first time. Since most of the actual listening, the learners will be exposed to outside of the class is likely to be real life conversation, materials should be in real-life situations for listening comprehension exercises at least at the beginning level. The teachers can easily adapt to listen to exercises those situations through the text presented oral drills and communicative activities, just by giving learners a slightly different twist. Listening exercises should be as natural as the situations from which they grow. In other word, an exercise in listening comprehension must be as close as possible to real-life. This means teachers provide learners a language environment to teach listening effectively. In listening activities, teachers must define the most important features as: coping with the sounds, understanding intonation and stress, coping with redundancy and noise, understanding colloquial vocabulary, understanding different accents and using visual and environmental clues. It means that while planning exercises, listening materials, tasks and visual materials should be taken into consideration. The teachers should produce a suitable discourse while using recoding. A pre-set purpose, learner's response, motivation, success, and feedback should be the things considered while preparing the task. Teachers can also categorize the goals of listening as listening for enjoyment, for information, for persuasion, for perception, for comprehension, and lastly to solve problem.

5 CONCLUSION

Listening is not mere recognition of linguistic units and their meanings. It comprises an ability to predict information based on linguistic context, and the situation and topic of the message conveyed by the linguistic code, as well as the expectations about the world. Listening helps also to understand and act according to the emotional state of the speaker. Listening is a vital part of any communication interaction so to language learners, language environment plays a very important role to help learners improve their listening skills. Language environment will make listeners a more effective communication at home, at work, or at school. It will also improve the social and professional life of listeners. Language environment concludes many factors influencing to listeners. These factors help listeners share of thoughts and feelings. The listeners rely on feedback from their speakers such as facial expressions, body language to let them know if they do not understand. Besides, the socio-cultural, factual, and contextual knowledge of the target language helps listeners develop listening comprehension. Moreover, providing a rich, language environment, first, help listeners develop opportunities and unique advantages for developing their listening skills. Second, it creates conditions for listeners to interact with others, build a good stock of words, explore how language works, understand what is said to them and build their confidence in response. The importance for language learners is learning cooperatively in language rich contexts, defining the purposes of listening to apply the appropriate listening skills in order to gain the most effective listening.

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