



Listening In English: Overcoming Common Challenges And Improving Comprehension

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Abstract:

Listening, the very basic language skill, is the gate way for enhancing the other skills like Speaking, Reading and Writing. Yet, it is pained to notice that such a skill is often overlooked in the present curriculum of both schools and colleges. Until the late 19th century, written mode was playing a paramount role in language learning and then onwards listening began to gain its importance in language teaching. The challenges towards teaching Listening are now better understood because of the new strategies contributing to effective listening. Still the assessment of students' listening skills remains far behind the current views of listening and hence innovations have to be madeto renovate the teaching of Listening.

It is a proven fact that the skill of Listening helps the students to be the best with their studies. The students who are good at Listening learn better and quicker and have sounder judgments about what is heard. It helps them to acquire detailed comprehension. Listening and vocabulary are interrelated. It is firmly believed that Listening and Speaking are by far two most important communication skills.

This paper deals with the definition of Listening, the basic difference between Listening and Hearing, different types of Listening, its importance in language acquisition, what hinders one from being an active listener, various process of Listening and at length discusses various strategies for enhancing this particular skill.

KEYWORDS: Listening, overlooked, enhancing Language skills, curriculum, paramount, innovations, hinders, Teaching skills and Language Acquisition.

Introduction:

The four essential skills that one has to master oneself for acquiring any language are Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW). It is explicit from the order itself how important the “Listening skill” is. Since it is the skill which helps to receive language input. According to Pourhosein Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), Listening skill plays a significant role in the process of communication. According to Krashen, Terrell, Ehrman, and Herzog (1984) acquisition happens only when learners have sufficient comprehensible input. It is obvious that learning cannot take place when there is no proper input. Hasan (2000) and Hamouda (2013) expressed that active listening provides the appropriate situations for the acquisition and expansion of other language skills i.e. Speaking, Reading and Writing. It is the skill of Listening which differentiates a good learner from a poor. According to Rost (2001) and Kurita (2012), a major difference between more successful and less successful learners is related to their caliber in using Listening as an instrument of learning. Students highly involved in listening learn better and faster (Boyle, 1987).

Ferris (1998), Murphy (1991), Vogely (1998), and Hamouda (2013) expressed that Listening is the most frequently used skill in the Language Classrooms. Hence, it is obvious that this skill is very important for the students since it is used as a means of learning at all phases of instruction. The most important challenge before the students is understanding what they listen to and whether they are able to give appropriate responses orally. Hence there arises a need for integration between Listening and Speaking while teaching, as our main concern is not only learning the grammar of the target language but also communicating in that language.

DEFINITION OF LISTENING:

Listening has been defined by many researchers. Thomlison (1984) and Hamouda (2013) defined listening as the ability to recognize and understand what others are telling. This process includes understanding a speaker's pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and understanding of meaning. Morley (1972) said listening involves auditory discrimination, aural grammar, selecting necessary information, remembering it, and connecting it to the process between sound and form of meaning (ascited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Bowen, Madsen, and Hilferty (1985) demonstrated that listening is understanding the oral language. Students hear oral speech, divide sounds, classify them into lexical and syntactic units, and comprehend the message (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Listening is a process of receiving what the speaker says, making and showing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and answering, and creating meaning by participation, creativity, and empathy. Listening is a complex process of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know (Rost, 2002 as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

According to Goss (1982), Listening is a process of understanding what is heard and organizing it into lexical elements to which meaning can be allocated (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). According to Purdy (1997), listening is the process of receiving, making meaning from, and

answering to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. Rost (2009) told that listening is an active and important mental ability. It aids us to understand the world around us and is one of the necessary elements in creating successful communication (as cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Thomlison (1984) defines listening as, "Active Listening, which is very important for effective communication". Listening can be also defined as, "More than just hearing and to understand and interpret the meaning of a conversation". Good Listening skill is mandatory to acquire any knowledge. Listening skills involve a different set of etiquettes, questioning for explanation, showing empathy and providing a suitable response.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEARING AND LISTENING:

Though seems to be similar, the two terms are entirely different. One can acquire knowledge by listening not merely by hearing. Listening is the better version of hearing. Hearing refers to the sounds that enter our ears. It is a physical process that happens automatically. Listening, however, requires more than that: it requires focus and concentrated effort, both mental and sometimes physical as well. Kline (1996) states that being aware of the difference between hearing and listening is an important feature for learning and teaching listening effectively. He has very well differentiated the two in simple words as follows "Hearing is the reception of sound; whereas listening is the attachment of meaning to the sound. Hearing is passive, listening is active". Mere hearing will not help to acquire knowledge.

Sound perception is the common criteria for both hearing and listening, yet the difference in terms reflects a degree of intention. According to Flowerdew and Miller (2005), all children are born with the ability to hear. Children first listen and then start to speak. They speak before they read, and finally writing comes after reading. That is, among all the other language skills, listening is the first one to appear (Lundsteen, 1979). When a listener takes part actively in the process of listening linguistically and uses his/her non-linguistic knowledge to follow up the message that the speaker intends in a conversation, if s/he listens, replies, and asks/answers questions, it is active listening (Lindsay & Knight, 2006, Littlewood, 1981).

TYPES OF LISTENING:

Based on objective and manner in which the Listener takes and respond, Listening is categorized as follows

Discriminative Listening:

This type of listening is the most basic type of listening whereby the difference between different sounds is identified. It can be defined as a type of listening where the listener differentiates between the two sounds produced even though he does not understand the meaning of the phrases or words. We learn to discriminate between sounds within our own language early, and later are unable to discriminate between the phonemes of other languages. This is one reason why a person from one country finds it difficult to speak another language perfectly, as they are unable to distinguish the subtle sounds that are required in that language.

Comprehensive Listening:

In this type of listening, a listener listens to different sounds and comprehends the meaning of each and every sound. This type of listening is little advanced listening skill to discriminative listening skill, but it is also a fundamental type of listening. The most basic element of comprehensive listening is a language a person should have the knowledge of a wide range of vocabulary, grammar rules, and syntax in order to decipher what others are saying. This type of listening is also called as content listening, informative listening and full listening.

Critical Listening:

Critical/ Analytical Listening is a type of listening which is made to evaluate a message for the purpose of either accepting or rejecting it. It focuses on evaluating whether a message is logical and reasonable. In this type of listening, a listener not only listens but also critically analyzes and evaluates what is being said. It is a kind of active type of listening. It is good where the process of Teaching-Learning takes place.

Biased Listening:

This type of listening takes place when a person listens to others with a biased mind. Here one is ready to hear what he/she thinks worth hearing. Biased listening can take place on the basis of certain stereotypes in the mind of the listener. Such biased listening is often very evaluative in nature.

Appreciative Listening:

In appreciative listening, we keenly listen to certain information which is appreciable. We use appreciative listening when we are listening to good music, poetry or maybe even the stirring words of a great leader. The very purpose of this type of listening is to encourage the listener to speak more and receive more information. In this type of listening, a listener looks for reasons to appreciate the speaker. A good example of appreciative listening is when listening to a piece of good music or poetry.

Sympathetic Listening:

In this type of listening, listening is made with concern for the well-being of other persons. We care about them and show this concern by paying close attention to them even though they may or may not be deeply connected with us for our act of listening offers them comfort/joy.

Empathic Listening:

Empathic listening is also called as therapeutic listening. This type of listening is made to provide emotional support for the speaker, as when a psychiatrist listens to a patient or when we lend a sympathetic ear to a friend. The listener focuses on understanding and identifying with a person's situation, feelings, or motives. There is an attempt to understand what the other person is feeling. The listener does not need to agree or feel the same way with the speaker; instead understand the type and intensity of feelings the speaker is experiencing without judgment.

Dialogic Listening:

In this type of listening, learning is made by listening through conversation and an engaged interchange of ideas and information in which one actively seeks to learn more about other persons and how they think.

Relationship Listening:

This kind of listening is made in order to develop, sustain or strengthen our relationship with others. This is why we can see lovers talking for hours and attend closely to what each other has to say. Parents patiently listen to what their wards utter. Relationship listening plays a vital role in the areas such as negotiation and sales, where it is helpful if the other person likes you and trusts you.

Active Listening:

Active listening is an important type of listening which encourages the speaker to continue speaking. The listener shall be able to ask questions which will encourage the speaker to proceed and share with more information. The class room listening will be of this kind.

Inactive Listening:

Inactive listening is the opposite of active listening. In this type of listening, the listener is completely disinterested and as such does not heed to what the speaker says. The involvement of the listener is almost zero. The listener would simply pretend to listen.

Casual Listening:

In this type of listening, the listener shows a little attention to the speaker. This type of listening takes place when a person is compelled to listen to something. Listening is done without obviously showing any attention. However, the percentage of attention shall vary from person to person.

Partial Listening:

This type of listening takes place when the listener is physically present, but mentally absent. The listener will be engaged in day-dreaming or thinking of a response. People with a highly creative mind are found to be involved in partial listening most of the time.

Reflective Listening:

This type of listening takes place when one listens as well as reflects on the thoughts and ideas conveyed by the speaker. Listening, then reflecting back to the speaker what he/she has said.

Deep Listening:

This type of listening occurs when the listener not only listens to what is being said but also reads in between the lines of what is being said. That means the listener understands the meaning, emotions, and beliefs of the speaker. This is yet another good sign of listening.

BARRIERS TO LISTENING:

Listening just seems to be easy; but it is, indeed, an arduous skill to master. There are a number of hurdles that pose a big problem for effective listening. The important barriers are listed under.

- i. Physiological Barriers:** There are some people who are physically challenged. They may have the problem of hearing impaired that prevents them from listening.
- ii. Physical Barriers:** These referred to distraction in the environment such as the sound of Classroom doors slamming, cell phones ringing, students having conversations outside in the hall are all examples physical barriers.
- iii. Attitudinal Barriers:** When we have a lot on our minds, we can fail to listen to what is being said as we're too busy concentrating on what we're thinking about. This is particularly true when we feel stressed or worried about any issue. Another common attitudinal barrier is egocentrism, or the belief that he/she is more knowledgeable than the speaker, or that there is nothing new to learn from the speaker. People with this kind of close minded attitude are very poor listeners.
- iv. Cultural Barriers:** Different accents can be barriers to listening. Since they interfere with the ability to understand the meaning of words that are pronounced differently. For example, in a country like India where there is enormous cultural diversity, accents may differ amidst the people of regional states.
- v. Gender Barriers:** Communication research has shown that gender can be barrier to listening. Studies have revealed that listening differs from men to women. Women are more likely to listen for the emotion behind a speaker's words; whereas men listen more for the facts and the content not the emotion.
- vi. Lack of Training:** We are not endowed with the skill of listening at the time of birth itself. This skill is developed through practice and training. Lack of training in listening skills is an important barrier.
- vii. Previous experiences:** We are all influenced by previous experiences in life. We normally respond to people based on personal appearances, or previous interpersonal encounters. When we meet with a stereotype person, it is quite natural for us not to show any interest in listening to such monotonous speech.
- viii. Listening to multiple conversations at a time:** It is not at all possible to listen to more than one conversation at a time. This will result in poor understanding or misunderstanding. For example watching television while attempting to listen to somebody's talk. Neither will be successful.

IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING:

It is needless to stress the importance of Listening Skill, for the order itself- LSRW- shows the vitality of this skill. It is, indeed, the gate way for developing all the other skills. Lundsteen (1979) expresses that Listening is the premier skill to appear. He continued that children listen to sound before they speak. Therefore, the significance of listening cannot be ignored. Especially in learning any language, listening plays a pivotal role, as it helps the learners to acquire pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary, and syntax and the comprehension of messages conveyed can be based solely on tone of voice, pitch and accent; and all these things are feasible only when we listen.

According to Rost (1994) and Ziane (2011), listening is imperative because it is the major process through which we get all inputs and without possessing that skill, learning cannot occur. Doff (1995) and

Ziane (2011) say that listening has a significant effect on developing speaking. The two skills complement each other. Besides, listening precedes speaking skill and without one the other is not at all possible. Emphasizing the importance of listening, Anderson and Lynch (2003) state that listening skills are as important as speaking skills because people cannot communicate face-to-face unless both types of skills are developed together. Listening skills are also important for learning purposes since through listening students receive information and gain insights (Wallace, Stariha & Walberg, 2004).

Listening plays a major role in communication in people's daily lives. As Guo and Wills (2006) state "it is the medium through which people gain a large proportion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and human affairs, their ideals, sense of values". According to Mendelson (1994) "of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50 %; speaking 25-30 %; reading 11-16 %; and writing about 9 %". While emphasizing the importance of listening in language learning, Peterson (2001) states that "no other type of language input is easy to process as spoken language, received through listening." When listening is made, a lot of factors should be specifically paid attention. They are context, facial expressions, and body gestures that are very important for the listeners to facilitate the understanding of what is conveyed by speakers (Ziane, 2011).

THE PROCESS OF LISTENING:

During the process of Listening, people experience several stages. Top-down Listening and Bottom-up Listening are the two processes that are commonly practiced. (Berne, 2004; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Mendelshon, 1994; Rost, 2002).

Top-down Listening:

Top-down processing has to do with how we use our background knowledge of the world (known as schema) to understand a text. Instead of depending on understanding individual letters, words, sentences or sounds, the listener uses information and knowledge that might come from outside the text. From our knowledge of situations, contexts, texts, conversations, phrases and sentences, we do understand what we hear.

Brown (2006) defines Top-down processing as the process of using our prior knowledge and experiences; we know certain things about certain topics and situations and use that information to understand. In other words, learners use their background knowledge in order to comprehend the meaning by considering previous knowledge and schemata.

Bottom-up Listening:

This means making as much use as we can of the low level clues. We start by listening for the individual sounds and then join these sounds together to make syllables and words. These words are then combined together to form phrases, clauses and sentences. Finally the sentences combine together to form texts or conversations.

According to Brown, Bottom up processing refers to the process of using the information we have about sounds, word meanings, and discourse markers like first, then and after that to assemble our understanding of what we read or hear one step at a time. According to Tsui and Full (1998), Top down processing is more used by skilled

listeners while less-skilled listeners use Bottom-up processing. Cahyono and Widiati (2009) state that successful listeners are those who can use both bottom-up and top-down processes by combining the new information and the knowledge that they already know. However, the two types of listening can also be practiced separately, as the skills involved are quite different.

HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE LISTENER:

The following tips will help one to be a good listener and thereby a good learner

i) Maintaining eye contact with the Speaker:

Eye contact is the basic thing for effective communication. When we converse, we are supposed to look each other in the eye. Listening will be marred if we do not look at the speaker. The speaker will also lose his/her enthusiasm in conveying the message when we do not look at them. Generally People who maintain eye contact are seen as reliable, warm, sociable, honest, confident, and active. Shyness, uncertainty, shame, guilt, or other emotion can hinder eye contact in some people under some circumstances. Be least bother about them.

ii) Be attentive:

Looking at the Speaker alone will not hold well, we have to be more attentive. It does not mean that we should be always staring at the speaker. We can take away our look now and then but keep attentive. Some be physically present, but mentally absent. Don't be distracted by your own thoughts, feelings, or biases.

iii) Keep an open mind:

Listen without judging the speaker or mentally criticizing what is being said. We should keep on listening without jumping into any abrupt conclusions. Enough patience will be required for clear understanding.

iv) Listen to the words and try to picturize what is being said:

We should allow our mind to create a mental model of the information that is being communicated. Whether a literal picture, or an arrangement of abstract concepts, our brain will do the necessary work if we stay focused, with all the senses fully alert.

v) Don't interrupt and don't impose your "solutions":

When listening to someone talk about a problem, we should neither interrupt nor suggesting solutions. Most of people don't want our advice anyway. We should not try to offer solutions unless it is demanded.

vi) Wait for the speaker to pause to ask clarifying questions:

We should allow the speaker to complete his or her speech fully. We should not try to respond in the middle. Any kind of interruption will disturb the speaker. Avoid guessing or assuming where his or her thoughts are going—this will create a negative impact on effective communication.

vii) Ask questions only to ensure understanding:

One way to show we are listening and make sure we have heard correctly is to ask specific questions about what is being said. This provides clarification, ensures understanding, and shows that we are listening.

viii) Give the speaker regular feedback:

The idea behind asking for feedback is to ensure the speaker that the message has been clearly understood. Positive feedbacks will boost up the speaker to come up with some more points. The feedback can even be in the form of nods from the listeners.

Conclusion:

To conclude, it has been observed that without possessing the skill of Listening, there shall be no chance for learning any language. Developing adequate listening skills is an important tool for language acquisition and language teachers should utilize this to guide their students in attaining language proficiency. Moreover, listening is mandatory not only for learning any language but also for learning other subjects. Hence, undue care has to be taken for enhancing one's listening skill. But many learners still find acquiring this skill a hard nut to crack. It is due to the fact that this skill is almost sidelined in the curriculum of schools and colleges. Normally, in language teaching, speaking is given with primary importance; whereas less importance is attached with listening skill although it is known that oral skills and aural skills cannot be separated from each other. So the need of the hour is to find out some ways and means to develop this skill amidst students. The teachers, in particular the language teachers, shall adopt a variety of techniques to help students learn good listening skills and acquire grammar and vocabulary needed at their level. Besides, suitable teaching in listening comprehension can decrease listening apprehension and provide a good basis for becoming independent learners. Finally, it can be concluded that by equipping the learners in the skill of listening, we help them to enrich their knowledge by which they can be successful learners.

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