

The Role of Listening in Language Learning

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Abstract: The article describes the theoretical aspects of developing language learning skills and the importance of listening comprehension in language learning.

Keywords: Listening comprehension, context, strategies, bottom-up, top-down, word boundaries, evaluating themes, stressed syllables

Introduction. It is not uncommon that language learning depends on listening. Listening is the language skill that is used most often in everyday communication. O'Malley inform us that “ we listen twice as much as we speak, four times as much as we read, and five times as much as we write” [3,16]. Furthermore, listening comprehension is the foundation upon which the other language skills are required.

Listening provides the aural input that serves as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication.

Thus, listening comprehension not only plays a crucial role in first language communication, but it is also “at the heart of second language learning” [3,20]. Teacher’s task is to inform and show students how they can adjust their listening behavior to deal with a variety of situations, types of input, and listening purposes. They help students develop a set of listening strategies to every listening situation.

Unfortunately, this essential language skill has often been neglected in the language classroom. Teachers sometimes assume that students are developing their listening skills just because they are listening to the teachers use the target language. Yet listening is a complex process that requires phonological, semantic, syntactical, discourse and pragmatic knowledge of the language as well as u understanding of the context and of nonverbal communication. Learners then have to apply this knowledge in a range of contexts, both unidirectional (e.g. lectures, radio broadcasts) and bidirectional (e.g. classrooms, discussions, conversations) listening situations, and while using a variety of technologies (e.g. telephones, computers, digital audio players)[2,14]. Taking into consideration the complexity of the listening comprehension process and the context in which it occurs, it cannot be supposed that a learner’s listening skill will develop on its own. Teachers must make conscious and systematic efforts to develop this skill in learners.

Main part. Listening skills are usually divided into two groups: bottom-up listening skills and top- down listening skills.

Bottom-up listening skills refer to the decoding process, the direct decoding of the language into meaningful units, from sound waves through the air, in through our ears and into our brain where meaning is decoded. To do it students need to know the code. How the sounds work and how they string together and how the codes can change in different ways when they are strung together. In other words bottom-up decoding shows meaning moves from recognition of individual sounds to recognition of the meaning of whole utterances. It is not uncommon that

most students have never been taught how English changes when it is strung together in sentences. The example of bottom-up skills:

- Recognizing individual phonemes;
- Recognizing phoneme sequences which form words;
- Recognizing word boundaries;
- Recognizing stressed syllables;
- Recognizing intonation patterns;
- Recognizing syllable reduction due to weak forms and elision;
- Recognizing catenation;
- Recognizing assimilation.

It is obvious that they tend to be phonological, and that is why teacher's goal is in focusing systematically on phonology during the course for students to better teach bottom-up processing skills.

Top-down skills or processing refers to how we use our world knowledge to attribute meaning to language input; how our knowledge of social convention helps us understand meaning. These are the skills that listening teachers should be teaching in their classes. Richards stated: "An understanding of the role of bottom-up and top-down processes in listening is central to any theory of listening comprehension" [4,50]. Top down processing refers to the attribution of meaning, drawn from one's own world knowledge, to language input. It involves "the listener's ability to bring prior information to bear on the task of understanding the "heard" language" [3,52].

Brown proposes the following top-down skills:

- discriminating between emotions
- getting the gist
- recognizing the topic
- using discourse structure to enhance listening strategies
- identifying the speaker
- evaluating themes
- finding the main idea
- finding supporting details
- making inferences
- understanding organizing principals of extended speech

There are a great number of sub-skills, which construct the overall skill of listening. Sometimes the bottom-up skills are called "micro" skills [2,78]. O'Malley proposed his own (subjective) checklist of sub-skills involved in listening, which shows the wide range of possible skills [3, 70]. He distinguishes the following skills: perception skills (recognizing individual sounds, discriminating between sounds, identifying reduced forms in fast speech, identifying stressed syllables, words, recognizing intonation patterns), language skills (identifying individual words and groups and building up possible meanings for them, identifying discourse markers which organize the content of information then, as the matter of fact, first, second, third, to start with), using knowledge of the world (using knowledge of a topic to guess what the speaker might be saying about it), dealing with information (understanding gist meaning, the main points, details), interacting with a speaker (coping with a variety of speakers in one recording – differences in speed of talking and accents, recognizing the speaker's intention, to identify his mood, attitude).

Good listeners need to be able to use a combination of sub-skills simultaneously when processing spoken language; the skills they will need at any particular moment will depend on the kind of the text they are listening to, and their reasons for listening to it. Of course, in the beginning, language learners will not be very good at these skills and teachers will need to teach them strategies for coping with what they have missed or misunderstood.

Conclusion. To sum up teachers and learners focus too much on the product of listening and too little on the process. The solution is to perform different listening exercises and activities using bottom-up and top-down strategies to acquire listening skills in learners. Listening exercises should fulfill different purposes: familiarizing learners with the skills. These skills and strategies practiced in isolation must later be combined and applied to a longer text. Effective use of listening skills and strategies will help us achieve desirable results in a classroom and real-life listening.

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