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THE PURPOSE AND NATURE OF THE LISTENING COMPREHENSION PROGRAM

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Abstract: Listening was used solely to accompany these texts and to provide models for oral reading. It was not until the late 1800s that listening was used in language instruction as a means of developing oral communication [8,p.139]. It was assumed that students would simply acquire the ability to understand the spoken form of the language if they occasionally heard their teacher speak it or listened to a tape of it being spoken. It was quickly demonstrated that this approach was simply not working.

Key words: communication, language, knowledge and strategies of learning, development, comprehension.

Foreign languages have been taught formally for centuries and records of language teaching materials have been around for over 500 years [8,p.139]. However, teaching listening comprehension as a part of teaching a foreign or second language is a relatively recent development whose history lies mostly in the last thirty years. In the earliest of teaching methods known, the grammar-translation method, learners focused exclusively on the analysis of written texts. This led to the development of the direct method in which oral presentations and aural comprehension were emphasized. The target language was exclusively used in the classroom and translation was proscribed. Second language learning was intended to proceed largely as first languages were learned - moving from tangible situations to more abstract ones. Initially, only every day, concrete vocabulary and sentences were taught.

Dialogues in which new grammar patterns and vocabulary were introduced were modeled by the teacher. The learners repeated chorally, trying to imitate the teacher's pronunciation. Oral drills, based on the dialogues, were devised to

reinforce these new language points, initially through a listening mode. Eventually, learners were given reading and writing assignments using the structures and words they had practiced.

At about the same time that the oral approach was being developed in Europe, American linguists began to propagate a somewhat more extreme approach called the audio-lingual method [8,p.140]. In this approach also, the emphasis was on oral presentation and oral drills. The purpose of this method was to retain learners to think in the new language by helping them to form new habits, a view that was obviously driven by the behavioral psychology that was popular at the time.

Although these oral-aural methods helped many pupils learn second languages, there has been a gradual decline in their popularity. Starting in the 1970s, there was a worldwide rethinking of the principles involved in second language teaching. The result of this came to be known as communicative language teaching, a movement that emphasized not just the importance of oral language in language acquisition, but the use of realistic and authentic social language [8, p. 140]. The communicative language teaching movement gave rise to the use of audio and later video material which reflected authentic language in use. Learners were no longer exposed to ideal grammar and vocabulary samples of oral language. Instead, they were given a steady exposure to situational dialogues and language fictions.

Simultaneous to the development of communicative language teaching, the study of second language acquisition became an accepted and increasingly respected discipline within linguistics and social science [1; 2; 8;].

One of the main reasons for getting students to listen to spoken English is to let them hear different varieties and accents – rather than just the voice of their teacher with its own idiosyncrasies. In today's world, they need to be exposed not only to one variety of English (British English, for example) but also to varieties such as American English, Australian English, Caribbean English, Indian English or West African English.

Despite the desirability of exposing students to many varieties of English, however, common sense is called for. The number of different varieties (and the degree to which they are different from the one students are learning) will be a matter for the teacher to judge. But even if they only hear occasional varieties of English, which are different from the teacher's, it will give them a better idea of the world language, which English has become.

The second major reason for teaching listening is because it helps students to acquire language subconsciously even if teachers do not draw attention to its special features. Exposure to language is a fundamental requirement for anyone wanting to learn it. Listening to appropriate tapes provides such exposure and students get vital information not only about grammar and vocabulary but also about pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, pitch and stress.

Lastly, students get better at listening the more they do it. Listening is a skill and any help we can give students in performing that skill will help them to be better listeners [5,p.97-98].

In order to define listening, we must outline the main component skills in listening. In terms of the necessary components, we can list the following:

- discrimination between sounds
- identifying grammatical groupings of words
- using background knowledge (what we already know about the content and the form) and context (what has already been said) to predict and then to confirm meaning
- recalling important words and ideas

Using general knowledge about language skill development, we can draw up some guidelines for developing listening ability:

Listening ability develops through face-to-face interaction.

By interacting in English, learners have the chance for new language input and the chance to check their own listening ability. Face-to-face interaction provides stimulation for development of listening for meaning.

Listening develops through focusing on meaning and trying to learn new and important content in the target language.

By focusing on meaning and real reasons for listening in English, learners can mobilize both their linguistic and non-linguistic abilities to understand.

Listening ability develops through work on comprehension activities.

By focusing on specific goals for listening, learners can evaluate their efforts and abilities. By having well-defined comprehension activities, learners have opportunities for assessing what they have achieved and for revision.

Listening develops through attention to accuracy and an analysis of form.

By learning to perceive sounds and words accurately as they work on meaning-oriented activities, our learners can make steady progress. By learning to hear sounds and words more accurately, learners gain confidence in listening for meaning [9,p.7].

The following main goals are suggested for the listening comprehension program:

(a) to give the learners experience of listening to a wide variety of samples of spoken language. The purpose here, then, is exposure to:

- different varieties of language (standard/regional, formal/informal etc.);
- different text types (conversational, narrative, informative etc.).

The motivation for the learner should be pleasure, interest, and a growing confidence at being able to understand the spoken language without reference to the written form.

(b) to train the learners to listen flexibly e. g. for specific information, for the main idea or ideas, or to react to instructions (i.e. by doing something). The motivation for this type of listening will come from tasks, which are interesting in their own right, and which will focus the learners' attention on the material in an appropriate way.

(c) to provide, through listening, a stimulus for other activities e. g. discussion, reading and writing.

(d) to give the learners opportunities to interact while listening. In the classroom this must be done largely through discussion-type activities and games, where listening forms a natural part of the activity. This type of activity will be done mostly in small groups, but there are occasions when the teacher can profitably interact with the whole class [1, p. 15].

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