

Teaching Listening Effectively: Lecture-Based L2 Classroom Scenario

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Abstract

As a teacher of English language and Literature in a country where English is a foreign or second language, the teachers cannot just make the students do different types of activities. They need to give long lectures too. The teachers often find their students not having the desired comprehension of their lectures. Coming from Non-English mother tongue background, most of the students lack the skill in listening to understand the lectures delivered by the teachers in English effectively. This creates frustration on part of the learners as well as with the teachers. Listening as a skill, in compare to the other language skills, is rather neglected. But listening as a skill cannot be ignored as it is a receptive skill. Receptive skills give way to the productive skills. That is why a less skilled learner in listening is more likely to produce undesirable result in his production of writing and speaking. It is because he cannot fully comprehend the lecture delivered by the teacher. In our paper we discussed why listening as a skill is so important, how the learners listen to comprehend, what are the reasons for which some learners are less skilled and last of all we tried to present some strategies which can be adopted by the teachers in a lecture based class to help the learners become more efficient in their listening so that they can comprehend the lecture delivered by the teacher and benefitted from the class.

Key words: Lecture-based classroom, Second language teaching, EFL, ESL, efficient, receptive skill, productive skill, listening comprehension

Introduction

Listening is the ability to understand, identify and interpret what others are saying. Second language (L2) listening comprehension is a very complex process where the listeners not

only have to discriminate between sounds or have to understand vocabulary and grammatical structures but also understand, interpret and retain these within the immediate context of the utterance. (Rost, 2002) defines listening in a process of receiving what the speaker actually says (receptive orientation); constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation); negotiation meaning with speaker and responding (collaborative orientation) and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation). So overall listening requires a complex skill on part of the listener to become efficient.

According to Bulletin (1952) in Saricoban (1999) listening is one of the fundamental language skills and research has showed that on an average an adult spend 40-50% of communication time listening (Gilman & Moody 1984). But unfortunately it is not until recently the importance of listening is being recognized (Oxford 1993). In the field of Second Language Teaching in the beginning of early 70's James Asher, Postovsly, Winitz and later Stephan Krashen brought attention to the role of listening as a key tool of understanding and thus facilitating learning the second language. But still today in compare to the other three skills (Speaking, writing and reading) listening is not given attention by the researchers, teachers and of course by the learners.

As listening is an invisible mental process and difficult to describe unlike speaking and writing, both the teachers and learners find it not so important or needed to spend their time in improving it. But the fact is, by ignoring listening as a skill the teachers and the learners are hampering their process in speaking and also in writing. Like reading listening is a receptive skill. For productive skills like speaking and reading, having good skill in listening is very important as receptive skills give way to productive skills.

Listening is the key to all effective communication. Without being a good listener no one can hope to understand and communicate messages effectively. In a lecture based class if the learners cannot effectively decode the messages they are getting from their teacher, they cannot produce effective result in their later on production which they do by using writing and speaking.

So to make any lecture based classroom effective for the learners, we have to make them listen effectively.

How the Learners Listen

Ability to listen effectively depends on the degree to which the listeners perceive and understand the messages (both verbal and non-verbal) coming from the speakers. This is a skill which cannot be acquired without proper attention to the process. There are two distinct processes used by the listeners:

- a. 'Top- down' process
- b. 'Bottom-up' process

The listeners while using top-down process use their prior knowledge to understand the meaning of a message. It can include listener's knowledge of the topic, the culture or other information related to the speaker's message. In bottom-up process the listeners use linguistic knowledge to understand the meaning of the message. Here the listeners use their knowledge about the distinctive sounds of the language, meaning of vocabularies used, and grammatical relationships used to bring out the lexical meanings. When the learners try to understand a listening comprehension they do not use any of the two processes but both at the same time. This is a huge task for the listeners. In a foreign or second language classroom setting the learners often fail to use these two processes effectively resulting a gap between the delivery of the lecture of the teacher and the level of understanding messages on part of the learners. This can be frustrating for both the teachers and the learners. In a lecture based class in EFL/ESL setting teachers can spend their valuable time and effort to enrich the students with lots of information, still fail to generate desirable outcome on part of the learners only because of their low level competency in listening.

Maintaining eye contact with the audience and adopting a posture appropriate for the context in which the talk is being given are qualities which are seen desirable in speakers by the listeners. It is the listener's responsibility to know how to use the environmental clues, the speaker's facial expression, posture, eye direction, proximity, gesture, tone of voice and the

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general surrounding contributing information in decoding the messages delivered by the speakers. To have successful listening the listeners have to find out the purpose of listening, activate the processes required for appropriate listening, make appropriate prediction and evaluate their success in their approach. Skilled listeners can do these in a better way in compare to their less skilled counterparts.

To have a good skill in listening to a foreign/second language, learners should have the ability to:

- a. Cope with the sounds
- b. Understand information and stress,
- c. Predict
- d. Cope with redundancy and noise
- e. Understand colloquial vocabulary
- f. Understand different accents
- g. Use visual and environmental clues.

Why Are the Learners Less Skilled in Listening

Unfortunately, in most of the EFL/ESL settings like the situations in Bangladesh, the learners and the teachers pay very insignificant amount of effort in improving these abilities. Along with these factors, a number of communicative activities which involve nonverbal behavior and ability to detect and portray messages through this medium is seen as a central interpersonal skill which is very essential for effective listening in a lecture based classroom. These issues are also ignored by both the teachers and learners. To have desired skill in this sector, in addition to presenting information orally, students must engage themselves in active listening and discussions as well as monitoring the reactions and responses from others which is rarely done. These skills also emphasize effective lecture presentation by the teachers. Non-verbal forms of communication is also seen as crucial components of effective presentation and can influence the message conveyed by both teachers in formal lecture situation (Brown and Manogue,2001) and students during presentations(Burkill, et al. 2000). But in a lecture based

class both the teachers and the learners pay little or no conscious attention to these factors. As a result, listening as a skill becomes the source of frustration in a lecture based classroom.

A learner can be a good or effective listener and follow instructions properly when the class focus is on listening or other types of activities. As the learner does not have to put all his/her attention in understanding the long speeches delivered by the teacher, having lower level of proficiency in listening may not create that much problem for both the learners and teachers. But in a class where understanding long lectures is mandatory, learners don't have any other choice but to become effective listeners. Unfortunately, in practical scenario we find the contrary.

There are lots of factors and issues which can contribute a lot in making a listener less-skilled in listening in a lecture based class:

- a. The listener can decide to have selective listening. They can listen only to the part they think as important and necessary which may make it difficult for them to get the essence of the whole topic and sometimes to get wrong idea about an important information.
- b. During the lecture a student can occupy his or her mind with the thought of how he or she is going to respond or ask question without listening to the teacher's voice attentively. The student can also engage himself in an imaginary conversation about what he wants to ask the teacher and loses concentration over the teacher's lecture resulting a poor understanding.
- c. To anticipate what the speaker is going to say based on the preconceived ideas, bias, stereotype and previous experiences student sometimes make assumptions and try to match them without giving proper attention to the actual delivery of the speaker.
- d. If students are not vigorously monitored they may talk to each other during the lecture. In that case some of them may even try to listen to more than one convention at a time.
- e. Sometimes students may find the communicator attractive or unattractive which can make them less focused in the lecture presented.
- f. Lack of interest in the topic discussed can produce lower level of understanding on part of the learners.
- g. Feeling unwell or tired, hungry, thirsty etc. during the class may result in poor attention to the lecture presented.

- h. Sometimes the learners may try to identify rather than empathize with the view presented by the speaker. Learners listen to what the speaker is saying but don't take it to heart. As they don't have an open mind, it becomes difficult for them to focus from I or me to them or you. Effective listening involves opening one's mind to the views of other.
- i. Making judgments about the speakers by the learners can also hamper effective listening; for example, the learners may create their opinion about the speaker that he/she is not very renowned or qualified enough. So there is no significance of listening to him/her.
- j. learners are influenced by previous experiences in life. Most of the time, they respond to people based on personal appearance, how initial introduction or welcome was received and to previous interpersonal encounters. They may stereotype a person and become less objective and therefore less likely to listen efficiently.
- k. When the listeners are preoccupied with stress or worry they tend to listen with less attention resulting in less understanding.

The key to effective listening is to have an open mind. Sometimes we don't want to listen to the ideas or opinions which contradict with of ours' own.

How Can We Make Our Students Listen

We listen for a purpose. If there is no specific purpose, we normally do not try to pay close attention to what we are listening. As there is an association between expectation, purpose and comprehension, a purpose should be given to our learners to make them listen. Proper training is necessary for the students to understand what is being said in the class to get them to disregard redundancy, hesitation and ungrammaticality which is not impossible to give even in a lecture based class. The most important thing is how the material is presented to the students. Teachers in their presentation of lectures and controlling the class can help the learners having the proper training required for developing their listening skill. Teachers should give clear lead in what they are going to hear. Some kind of visual back up to understand or some questions or tasks can also be given to them before the lecture so that they can clarify the things in their mind. But it should be ensured that all these things help in learning, not confusing the students.

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As a teacher, one must try his best to make the listeners listen. Because a group of inefficient listeners make a class turn into failure .So as teachers or instructors we can use some strategies which can eliminate the barriers of effective listening and make the effort of the instructor a success. As a teacher we can:

- a. Create a purpose for the students.
- b. Give enough background knowledge about the topic to be discussed.
- c. Show some visual pictures, multimedia presentation, vocabulary written on the board etc.
- d. Presenting the students with the key words, concepts of the topics. We can write them on the board or tell in the beginning of the class.
- e. Repeat the important information so that the students can listen and review it if they miss it in the first time.
- f. Create a positive vibe in the starting of the class. Smile, praise them, they will become stress free.
- g. Divide the lecture into chunks of 5-7 minutes duration. It is difficult for any listeners, specially, the learners who don't have desired efficiency level in listening to follow and decode the messages presented by the speaker for longer than that.
- h. Don't let the students be distracted by the other students talking and having different types of movement including body-language.
- i. If as a teacher you cannot control the outside noise, talk about it in a way so that the students become positive about it and accept it as part of their environment.
- j. Don't let the students go on with the non verbal signs of not listening. If you notice a student not having an eye-contact, having sloppy shoulders or a lazy posture, tell him to sit properly. Look at him and if possible, ask him something easy or interesting. It will make him listen to you even if he is tired or was a bit reluctant as a listener.
- k. Always encourage them to listen as anyone can become skilled in listening if they try. Tell them, it takes time but if they try and practice they will be able to listen effectively which will make them a better writer and speaker.

Conclusion

To conclude, we should tell the students to evaluate themselves. If they can find out their weaknesses and strengths, they will be able to find out the strategies to overcome their own weakness and use their strength to develop themselves. They can be encouraged to share their individual routes they follow in their listening. It will help them to understand what to and how to change their own strategies to have a better listening.

Having support from the teachers even in a lecture based class can help the learners to become better listeners which in the long run will make them turn into better learners. Teachers may not be able to enjoy the benefit immediately but if they keep on going, very shortly they will have a group of listeners paying more attention and producing better results in assessments.

Creating space for effective listening for the learners will definitely increase the effectiveness of the lectures of the teachers.

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