

The Importance of Listening Skills in Language Teaching: An Observation

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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to bring forth the importance of 'listening' in language teaching. Eventually, it does become important in language learning also in addition to teaching. No language is exception to this, though it is much spoken of in the realm of ELT making it specific to English language. Language is a special faculty accorded to human beings. The greater skill of language comprises its own sub skills viz listening, speaking, reading and writing—usually stated as LSRW skills. Despite its first place in the list, practically speaking, the listening skill turns out to be the much neglected skill in the academic arena, particularly at the primary level, more particularly in the educational institutions where the mother tongue is the medium of instruction. Therefore, a probe is made here to analyse the status quo, the causes and thereby an attempt is made to give feasible solution to the problems of this neglected or low attention paid skill of listening.

Keywords: Language Skills, LSRW, Listening, Neglected Skill, Importance, Attention, Distractions, Back-channelling, Problems, Causes, Solutions

Introduction

Language teaching and language learning has become a challenge these days. Despite the technological advancements, smart classrooms, tech savvy students, the art as well as science of language learning/teaching does not seem to have attained the level it should have by now, more so in the rural India. There are schools, colleges and other learning centres that cater to the needs of language learning. But, as a main skill of communication, social getting along and human mutual understanding, the language that is in use among the learners (in certain cases, among teachers too) is defective, loosely constructed, mispronounced and misleading. A vast storehouse of literature, audio visual and other support materials are readily available for both the teachers and the taught. Number of academic forums like seminars, conferences and symposia across the globe and throughout our country do brainstorm the phenomenon of language teaching. All these academic exercises, if they get translated to action work, or sheer practice, it should have brought about the desired results. In our country, many a plan does not get completely translated into fruitful action. And language teaching is no exception to this.

English Language Teaching in India

Ever since the good old days of colonialism, the teaching of English in India has undergone various stages, be it at primary or tertiary level. All the professionals at the fulcrum of teaching English would invariably agree with one point that the English have been instrumental in making the language spread to every avenue of education. This has amounted to the assertion that, apart from being a language to be taught as a medium of instruction, it has assumed the role of an individual subject of study in schools and colleges taking the position of a so called ‘the second language’, since the position of first language has always been accorded to the pupil’s mother tongue or the vernacular language.

The English, the Anglo-Indians and ultimately Indians all, in their own ways have contributed their mite of teaching and exploring English language. In addition to ‘King’s English’, ‘Queen’s English, Good English, Better English, Standard English etc, an indigenous entity has also come to stay here in India for ever known as Indian English.

Today, a large group of teaching fraternity are engaged in teaching English at various institutions, primary schools, high schools, polytechnic colleges, colleges, universities, deemed universities and other institutes of National Importance. Government schools and the Municipal Corporation schools which were hitherto conducting the regional medium classes, have suddenly switched over to English Medium classes even at the primary level. They say that they cater to the needs of the society.

Parents from the rural India also prefer their children study in English medium even in the case of their local government run schools. It could be easily asserted that a strong need has arisen from the learners, especially from their parents to educate them through English medium. Be it a medium of instruction or a language subject, it has come to stay. None can say no to English language in India. Hence, English language teaching will also eventually have a permanent stay here.

Language Skills

A voluminous storehouse of literature is accessible these days to teach as well as learn the language skills. Though many of them have their discourses on varied skills of language learning, it is universally accepted and known that language skills are identified with an acronym called LSRW skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. The way in which the acronym gets arranged itself denotes the fact how important these skills are based on their order of priority, The foremost in the bandwagon is ‘listening’ on which the present paper focuses its attention. The learner as well the teacher has to pay much attention to the first skill—the skill of listening—both literally and figuratively. An Indian teacher has rightly observed:

Listening is the first step in language learning, whether it is the child’s mother tongue or an additional language. Before the child is able to

speak, read or write in English, he must hear it...Listening should occupy an important place in learning English language particularly at the primary stage. (Dash 35-38)

The problem is: Does it happen so in the process of teaching and learning a language, especially, in the case of English language? This is what all concerned should address at our educated forums, discussions and analysis etc.

Why an Emphasis on ‘Listening’?

A probe may start with this fundamental question: Why should the teachers and learners focus their attention on this skill—listening? This would inevitably give us many answers. First of all, one should recognize that listening is the one skill among the four which has either been neglected or no attention has been paid to. Everyone assumes that it is a natural process. This position is assumed in the process of teaching or learning a language, here in the case of English. Most of the teachers give exercises on other three skills. For instance, they ask the students to read aloud the text in the book. Passive reading exercises are also given to check their reading comprehension. Writing practice and exercises to develop their writing skills are also given periodically. In addition, students have to ‘write’ their tests and examinations in English.

The need for the development of the skill of English speaking has been growing. Students who can extra expenses go to so-called ‘Spoken English classes’ paying a huge fee and come out with some level of speaking skill: in several cases, they come out with ‘broken English’ instead of ‘spoken English!

Under these circumstances, where and how does the learner catch the most important skill ‘listening’? Is it not the duty of the English Language Teacher to look into this major issue of facilitating the learners to master the skill of prime importance? Of course, one cannot just say no teacher is doing it. Some do it. How about the rest? Another important aspect is, as teaching-learning is a two-way process, both the teacher and the student may be held jointly responsible for the failure to master the language skills.

The Causes and Measures of Solution

Before embarking on the causes and remedial measures of making listening successful in language teaching, a look at the rubrics of skill concerned will throw more light on the problem. Listening is a passive as well as a receptive skill compared to speaking, reading and writing. If one looks at the occasions where a learner grabs the opportunity to listen, then one can consider the other parameters to master it, the ways and means with a willing mind to pay attention. The receptive nature of the skill has negatively given way to the prejudice that everything the speaker has said has been well received—or ‘listened to’ by the listener. It is just a fallacy.

An exponent on teaching methods, commenting on listening skill, has opined:

This is the receptive skill of the language and to a certain extent, it is a concomitant activity...Its value per se is greater at the higher levels...the ability to follow a lecture, to listen to a talk on the wireless, or to take a course at a university, it is an extremely useful and valuable accomplishment. (Sharma 36 & 37)

For the school as well as college students, it is mostly through their teachers' teaching, especially through their lectures, explanations, instructions and so on, the learners are expected to make use of their 'listening' skill. Away from their academic environment, the social arena also gives them certain opportunities, viz. public announcements, radio talks, television shows, social media, audio clippings used in their mobile phones, tabs, laptops, personal computers and the rest. Through these opportunities, they practice this foremost skill of language listening. So, the opportunities are plenty and varied.

A close observation of the phenomenon of 'listening', will reveal that many of the learners take it for granted that they have caught what is spoken or announced or instructed. They just think that they have understood what is conveyed to them. Even under normal circumstance, especially when two individuals get engaged in a dialogue, both want to have their turn to speak first. Neither is interested in listening. They either partly listen or do not listen at all as their focus is on their own talk than on intently listening to the other.

If that is so, a learner in the school has got a lot of distractions. The young learner does not fully listen to the entire lecture or complete set of instructions given by the teacher. Half-way through the course of lecture, he gets some sort of boredom that leads to distraction. In certain cases, the noisy environment of classrooms, lecture halls and such surroundings also hinder the listening of the learner. Hence, both the noisy physical environment and the psychological barriers of the learner equally contribute to the impairment of the 'listening' skill. The pertinent question is how to find out certain feasible solutions to overcome these obstacles to listening.

Having analysed the causes and problems of mastering the listening skill in language learning/teaching, it is high time to arrive at some feasible solutions to this issue. As a rule of thumb, one has to strongly understand that the more one listens, the better he can speak. For, the articulate spoken skill largely depends on the passive and receptive listening skill. It is also stated that the more one reads, the better can he write. Hence, a learner or novice should give prime importance to listening, if he wants to become a good speaker. Here, the term 'more' does not mean continuous. The acquisition could be intermittent, but it should actually be intentional. In a classroom conditioning, the teacher/lecturer or the speaker should note that it is a time-bound task. He should not take too much time at a stretch to deliver his speech. If there is a need, the speaker can continue after a break. If not, the listener tends to strike boredom and eventually gets distracted. Within the classroom, various activities could help develop listening proficiency, even as it will increase the participation of students in these activities. Mere lecture will not help develop listening skill.

Another aspect of delivering speeches to develop successful listening of the students or the audience is the point of checking whether the delivery is received well. This checkpoint turns the

listening skill an active one which has hitherto been repeatedly considered as passive and receptive. As one speaks, he can ascertain whether the listener is interested or is coming along with him by obvious external markers like a tone of agreement/acceptance, or a nod of the head, or a bright smile or any other similar responses to the stimulus of his speech. This is technically known as back-channelling. An appropriate remark of a noted linguist is suitable here:

The responsibility of the listener is to provide back-channelling. All the time we are listening, we must give signs to the speaker that we are understanding what is being said, and that we are paying attention...Back-channelling is very important and if the listener even stops providing this, the speaker will quickly sense that something is wrong and will likely stop speaking. (Buck 13)

A listener should never assume that he has understood what all is said. This assumption is his pitfall. It leads to half understanding, or at times misunderstanding. Instead, he may ask the speaker to repeat what the listener failed to carry in his memory. The listener should, in such circumstance, resort to note-taking. Nothing wrong in making a note of whatever is spoken or whatever is listened. Because, the skill of good listening often goes hand in hand with right form of note-taking or note-making.

A good speaker also facilitates good listening. He should therefore, before making his speech, should verify whether the classroom/seminar hall/the auditorium is noise-free. For the ideal listener, an important requirement is attention. He should be attentive enough to gather the facts and figures in the delivery of the speaker. At times, the listener requires a high degree of attention, which is otherwise known as 'focussed attention'. At certain junctures, he should look for the minute details in what is spoken. Hence, it calls for a special acumen. The same is pointed out by a writer:

Indeed, the mark of a competent listener is the ability to select a listening type that is appropriate to the input being processed and the task in hand...it is important for skills practice to take greater situation and of the listener's need to respond appropriately to a particular type of input...A good listener varies the depth of attention and the locus of attention according to his goals...and to decide about which information is important and which is not. (Field 59-60, 75)

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be stated that 'listening' skill is the one that has either been neglected or the one which gets less importance. Be it at the plane of language teaching or in a general social context of human interaction, special emphasis must be laid upon the honing of this listening skill which justifiably claims primary importance. Both teachers and students are engaged in the process; speaker and listener in any face-to-face communication should nurture a good habit of listening intently, avoiding all the physical and psychological barriers.

One should always be prepared for listening what all is spoken; avoid all sorts of distracting forces, be they internal or external; should never have any prejudice on the speaker; should never

think that he has understood completely; should give some physical response of acceptance, agreement or understanding to the speaker to ensure that the listening process is rightly going on; 'listening should be accompanied by physical movement. Speech and other productive skills should come later' (Richards & Rodgers 74) ; the speaker should also understand that his lectures are not boring; he should make his delivery interesting and informative for the listener to listen; in schools and colleges, the language teachers should give more listening comprehension exercises than the reading comprehension exercises; the teacher concerned, especially the language teacher, say here, the English language teacher, should device a mechanism or check or test whether the learner has acquired the proper listening skills; the language teacher also should see that the listening exercises go hand in hand with note-taking and note-making so that the students will be able to recollect and reform the points and form them into a whole report.

Above all, the sincere listener should always be attentive to goods delivered through speech, instruction, order, announcement, discussion, debate, or through any other social channels of communication. If these measures are taken care of by a listener, along with facilitating factors of an organisation as well as the speaker/teacher/trainer, then the much neglected skill of language will get rejuvenated. And through right and good listening, right communication can be ensured.

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