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Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Teaching Listening Skill at UG Level in Mumbai University A Case Study

Anjali Verma, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Importance of Listening Skill

English teaching in India caters to the needs of large number of learners and there is an amazing variety among them. The total number of learners of English in India will be more than the total population of many countries in Europe. Teaching second language in a multicultural and multilingual country like India requires conscious strategies and constant efforts from both teachers as well as students.

The present paper deals with listening skill which is necessary for success in life and work. Listening is often considered as 'passive' receptive skill. In reality it involves complex mental processing in order for the listener to make sense of the material. Listening occurs more frequently than speaking, reading or writing and is just as demanding and important.

Listening is a very important language skill and a foundation for learning. We cannot ignore teaching this skill if we want our learners to be proficient in English. Mumbai is the commercial capital of India and students graduating from this university will be joining the workforce.

Serving a Dual Purpose

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Listening serves a dual purpose in second language learning. We have to extract meaning when we listen to any material in second language and it is a tool for improving familiarity with and ability in the language we are learning. We listen to second language in order to find out some information.

We also try to improve our knowledge of vocabulary and structure to increase our comprehension or to improve our own speaking or writing skills.

The ability to understand the spoken form of the foreign language is not acquired naturally. This ability has to be taught. But unfortunately, in the present ELT situation, little is done deliberately to promote and consolidate oral language skills. There is a need for a systematic development of these skills.

Main Problems

1. Students may not have been formally taught how to listen. What they do know about it they have learnt by the process of trial and error.
2. Students do not perceive certain English sounds with any accuracy because these sounds do not exist, or as separate phoneme/s in their own language.
3. Many students find consonant-clusters difficult to cope with.
4. Language learners feel that the language they are learning is spoken much faster than their own and the words seem to merge into one another. The difficulty is in perceiving and recognizing individual words and phrases.
5. Our ears are so accustomed to our own language that sometimes we do not perceive some of the sounds in the second language.
6. Adjusting to the rhythm, pronunciation and intonation of the second language is a challenge. For sometime we have to just absorb the sound before working on improving our comprehension.
7. Stress pattern of a language plays crucial role in comprehension. People learning second languages find it difficult to break up a stream of sound. This causes considerable difficulty. We unconsciously apply the rules about the stress and intonation pattern of our own language to the target language.

Mumbai University – Listening Skill Teaching and Learning Problems

- 1) In Mumbai University the syllabus for the first year degree course in arts, science and commerce is drafted by the Board of Studies in English. In the first year B.Com level Business Communication is a compulsory subject in semesters I and II, whereas Communication Skills paper is taught in the first year B.A. level in semesters I and Semester II. Students are assessed at the end of the semester through a final examination.
- 2) Tutorials are an integral part of the course of study. There is absence of any kind of language planning. In most of the colleges tutorials in the subject of business

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- communication and communication skills are not conducted at all due to lack of infrastructure.
- 3) Listening is an important topic in the semester I syllabus. The syllabus mentions that listening exercise should be conducted in tutorial classes.
 - 4) In theory lecture class, the strength of class is 120 students. It is not possible for a teacher to conduct listening exercise in such a large class. Large class is a major challenge that teachers have to face and overcome in a constructive way.
 - 5) It has been observed that listening comprehension tends to be neglected in the classroom due to lack of adequate materials and tools.
 - 6) University has come out with its own textbook but as far as listening exercises are concerned, the textbook is not helpful. It is completely left on the whims of the teachers to decide on the nature of exercises to be given to the students.
 - 7) It is not possible for every teacher to develop teaching materials themselves. They are not trained as far as teaching material production is concerned. One of the challenges of teaching English language is the lack of state-of-the-art instructional materials.
 - 8) The antiquated examination system clearly reflects the quality of education imparted in our colleges. Unfortunately, listening skill is not tested in the semester final examination. Reading, writing and, to a certain extent, speaking skills are often tested but we never test students for their listening ability. We assume that students will develop this skill in due course of time.
 - 9) There is a steep fall in the standard of English at the college level. After going through the syllabus, it appears that the whole exercise is undertaken in the examiner's/examinee's mind rather than in the classroom with the teacher.

Teaching of English at the UG Level

The teaching of English at the UG level is essential. Students leaving school show great diversity in their level of achievement. While it is hoped that the teaching of English at the school stage will improve, it is obvious that the teaching at the college level will have to take on at least a part of the responsibility of ensuring that students get the English which they are going to need later.

Strategic Approach

Remedial English Course should be included for students with limited exposure of English language at college level to bridge the gap between the vernacular medium students and English medium students. But very few colleges have remedial teaching programme in place.

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This strategic approach to teaching L2 listening has not been whole-heartedly embraced by practitioners, in particular when they work with lower proficiency learners of English. Strategy instruction places a heavy demand on the teachers.

Teachers are not totally convinced that strategy instruction can solve their students' listening difficulties which often stem from basic decoding (word recognition) problems. They claim that lower proficiency learners have not acquired a threshold level of proficiency to take full advantage of strategy instruction. This view is shared by a number of researchers (Littlejohn, 2008; McDonough, 2006; Swan, 2008)

Strategies

These difficulties will not be overcome simply by drawing the learner's attention to the presence and importance of environmental clues; on the contrary, such action is liable to increase the number of details he feels he has to take in, and make him even more frustrated (Clarke, 1980). Following strategies can be adopted to try to improve ability in this area:

1. The teacher should have access to different exercises designed to give practice in this skill.
2. Prominence should be given to teaching students how to listen and to help learners to develop conscious strategies for improving this skill.
3. We should listen to the native speakers of the language we are learning to understand the stress pattern from their language. Then we can apply that stress pattern when we are speaking their language.
4. When listening to the second language, try to choose material which is relevant and which is easily accessible.
5. Listening awareness also includes developing a familiarity with the sound of the language.
6. Listen to people with different accents and different varieties of the language we are learning, so that we develop strategies to cope with this.
7. Listening ability of the students should be tested in the examination.
8. Tutorials should be conducted in all the colleges where personal attention can be given to students.
9. Needs analysis of the students should be done in the beginning of the programme so that accordingly remedial classes be arranged for the students.

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