

# Teaching Listening in the Korean Language Classroom in India

**Satish Chandra Satyarthi, M.Phil.**

Centre for Korean Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

[scsatyarthi@gmail.com](mailto:scsatyarthi@gmail.com)

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## 1. Introduction

Listening is one of the most basic language skills. This is the first language activity that human beings are exposed to after being born, even before being born. It is an accepted fact that listening contributes the most to the learning of L1. Speaking comes only much later, writing and reading even more lately. Speaking, itself, does not constitute communication unless what is being said is understood by another person (Rivers, 1966). Research says that out of our total communication time an average of 45% is spent listening compared to 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing. (Adler, R. et al. 2001). But when it comes to second or foreign language teaching, listening gets the least attention among the 4 language skills (reading, writing, and speaking being the other 3 skills). Until 1970s listening was considered a passive skill and it was assumed that language learner would learn it by ‘osmosis’ (a term coined by Mendelsohn (1984)) without any assistance from teachers.

In the 1970s listening started getting attention of researchers as an important aspect of language learning. The Communicative language teaching approaches and Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) gave research on listening a boost. After 2 decades of research, listening, now, has been recognized as a critical component of language learning and teaching but there is a still a huge gap between theory and practice in the classroom and much work remains to be done. (Morley, 2001)

The goal of most of Korean language learners is to be able (i) to get job in a Korean company or in the Korean process of an MNC, (ii) to go to a Korean university for higher studies or research, (iii) to successfully communicate with native speakers and (iv) to be able to enjoy Korean literature, movies, drama, and music by comprehending them. None of these goals is possible to reach without good listening skills in Korean language. One of the biggest challenges to foreigner employees doing Korean translation and interpretation jobs is to be able to understand what their Korean colleagues, boss or clients are speaking. Similarly for foreigner students studying in Korean universities, one of the biggest obstacles in pursuing their study or research is to understand the lectures or professors’ instructions. But listening occupies the least amount of space in our Korean language textbooks and curricula. Listening has been one of the less researched fields of Korean language education. This paper aims to

study what makes listening a difficult and complex task for foreigner learners of Korean language and what can be done in the classroom to overcome those obstacles.

## 2. The Process of Listening

Until a few decades back listening was considered a passive skill and just exposure to spoken language was supposed to be sufficient for the learners to develop their listening skills. Reading and listening both were seen under the bigger umbrella of Comprehension skills and most of the research assumed that the same comprehension theories, approaches, and strategies could be applied to both reading and listening. Though now researchers recognize that listening needs a totally different set of skills, as it is different in nature from reading. (Long, 1989) Apart from all the other factors of reading, listening also involves the sound factor and unlike reading it happens in real time, making it more difficult and complex. Moreover, written and spoken languages have differences in terms of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Therefore, we need to have different approaches towards teaching reading and listening.

Listening in a foreign language is a complex process which involves (i) using information from phonetic, phonological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic sources at the same time (Osada, 2004), (ii) storing the message in short term memory while trying to understand its components (Rubin, 1995) and (iii) using cues from contextual information as well as existing knowledge (O'Malley, Chamot and Kupper, 1989). There have been two approaches to look at listening from a processing and pedagogical point of view - Bottom-up processing and Top-down processing.

Bottom-up processing involves understanding the individual units of the message (e.g., phonemes, words, clauses, sentences etc.) and combining them to understand the complete meaning of the message. Anderson and Lynch term this model 'listener as tape recorder' view of listening because in this model the message is stored and processed by the listener in the sequence it is received, the same as a tape recorder. On the other hand, in the Top-bottom processing model, the listener, instead of decoding lexical, phonetic, and syntactic units of the message, uses the cues from context and his existing background knowledge to understand the meaning (Richards, 1990). A good listener makes effective use of both Top-down and Bottom-up processing methods while the inefficient listeners are stuck finding the meaning of every single word (O'Malley et. al, 1989).

The Top-down approach of listening is closely related to Schema theory. The basic point of the Schema theory is that a written text or spoken message contains no meaning in itself but it is the listeners' existing background knowledge (schemata) that adds meaning to it. If the schemata of the speaker and listener are different it is possible for the listener to misunderstand the meaning. (Chiang & Dunkel, 1992) According to Nunan (1999), if listener is unable to activate appropriate schemata in a situation, communicating successfully

in a foreign language can be difficult. Therefore, language learners should be explicitly taught to use appropriate schemata when listening in a foreign language.

### 3. What Makes Korean Listening Difficult?

Even after years of direct instruction in Korean language, why do learners find it difficult to comprehend spoken language in real life situation, like when listening to a lecture or a news broadcast. Sometimes even the simple Korean sentences spoken by native speakers are difficult to understand. If those sentences are given to the listener in written form, he would have no difficulty in understanding them but when spoken they are difficult to comprehend. So obviously, lack of grammar and vocabulary information is not the only reason that makes the listening difficult. After talking with a number of Korean language learners, I found that the main reason why they find listening challenging even after learning Korean in a classroom for years is that listening in real life is much different from Korean listening practice that they are exposed to in the classroom. So, even after listening to Korean language for months and years in the classroom, when they come to the real world, they find Korean language utterances quite unfamiliar and unrecognizable. Following are the main factors that make real-life Korean listening different from classroom listening: -

- I. **Real-time** - Unlike the listening activities in Korean classroom, in real-life situation learners get only one attempt at understanding the utterance. There are no multiple playbacks nor are there ‘pauses’ and ‘going backs.’ This puts an extra load of processing on the learner. However, they can always ask the speaker to repeat but that is not always practically possible, especially in situations like - listening to university lecture, doing a simultaneous interpretation job.
- II. **Speed** - Korean language teachers are trained to adjust their speed of speaking according to the listening ability of the learners. They also put extra effort to maintain a constant speed of utterance when teaching a particular class. Even the listening tapes used in the classrooms are recorded in professional and controlled environment and have a constant speed adjusted to the language level of the learners. It makes the lesson more comprehensible, and learners feel confident. But in real-life, many times the speakers may have no prior information about the listener’s Korean language level or may not be able to assess it as a teacher would and thus, they may speak at a speed, which is too fast for the listener.
- III. **Pronunciation, Accent and Tone** - The Korean language audio material, used in the classroom for listening activities and exercises, are generally recorded by professional voice-over artists, in soundproof studios. Their audio contents have clear and correct pronunciation, a standard accent, and a constant tone, which makes them easier to understand. In real life, people may have different pronunciations, sometimes even wrong, diverse accents and tones depending on their background, age, or gender. These diversities make Korean listening more difficult for foreigner learners. In the Korean

language institutes, the same teachers teach a particular batch of students for long periods. This makes the learners familiar with the pronunciation, accent, tone and speaking style of their teachers and they are able to understand them without any problem. But when they communicate with native speakers in real-life outside the classroom, even the simple sentences may sound ‘foreign’ to them because they are outside their ‘familiar listening zone.’

**IV. Colloquial** - The language that teachers speak in the Korean language classroom and the language of the recorded audio content is generally a standardized formal language, which is closer to the written form of language. While in the real-life communication, people may use colloquial language. They may use a different set of expressions and vocabulary and drop important elements like particles. These changes put a lot of stress on the listener.

**V. Authentic** - The language used in listening activities in the Korean language classroom is generally not authentic. Most of the times, the content is made up to match the level of the class and for the purpose of practicing the grammar and vocabulary being learned. So sometimes, the students are not concerned about the complete meaning of the content. They are rather focused on finding the answers to the questions in it. One more thing worth noticing here is that many of the listening activities in the classroom are not participatory; the student is just a passive listener and is supposed to answer the questions ‘based’ on the content. However, in real-life communication, learners are supposed to comprehend the spoken message and respond immediately in a meaningful way. This expectation makes the listener extra self-conscious and anxious which in turn makes the listening process more difficult.

**VI. Grammar & Vocabulary** - In the classroom, learners are exposed to a controlled set of grammar and vocabulary. They are almost sure that the teachers’ utterance or recorded content will not contain lexical and syntactic elements that they are not even remotely aware of. And even it does, they can always raise their hand and get an explanation. In real life, people have no way to ascertain exactly what grammar patterns and vocabulary you know. Many people are not very good at ‘Foreigner Talk<sup>1</sup>.’ So many times, the spoken message contains grammar and vocabulary that listeners don’t know, and this makes listening to such content (e.g. news, movies) tedious and communication (in case it’s a conversation) difficult.

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<sup>1</sup> Foreigner Talk is a term in linguistics and language teaching for the conventionalized and simplified kind of language used by many native speakers with foreigners. It has a simple or non-existent morphology, more or less fixed word order and simple syntax. (Tom McArthur, 1998, *Concise Oxford companion to the English language*)

**VII. Intrinsic Factors** - Apart from all these external factors there are some intrinsic factors- like anxiety, self-confidence, social situation, comfort level with the speaker - that affect the listening comprehension ability of the Korean learners. Since they are not exposed to a different set of situations with different people in oral communication classrooms, they may find themselves nervous sometimes in real-life situations.

#### **4. Need of an Improved Approach**

Based on the discussion above, it can be said that there is a need of an improved approach to teaching listening in Korean language classroom. The aim of the new approach should be to bridge the gap between listening in the classroom and that in real life situations, to the best extent possible while keeping the teaching methods learner-centered. Following are some suggestions that I want to make for a new improved and efficient Korean listening education.

**A. Taking Teaching of Listening Seriously** - First and foremost, we need to realize that we need to devote as much time and effort on teaching listening as we do on teaching speaking, reading, and writing. We need to include more listening activities in our daily classroom activities. If possible, we should consider having dedicated classes for Korean listening. This is especially required when learners are learning Korean outside Korea and have very limited opportunity to listen to Korean language. Authentic listening material can be picked from Korean movies, drama, interesting TV shows, news broadcast, podcasts etc. and can be used in the classroom.

#### **B. Instructional Material Development for Listening**

There is an acute shortage of authentic listening instructional content, especially for intermediate and advanced level of Korean language learners. There is a dire need for Korean language researchers and educators to put some effort to develop authentic Korean listening content tailored to different language levels, to be used as teaching material in the classroom and also as self-study material by learners. When developing content for Korean listening it should be made sure that the topics are from real-life situations and the voices are from people of different backgrounds, ages, and genders. The need of diversity in listening content cannot be emphasized enough. The audio material should be as close to real life as possible. For example, if it is a dialogue between a shopkeeper and customer then recording should have some natural background noise of market; the voice over artists should ‘act’ like shopkeeper and customers to bring the ‘real feel’ to the content. The speed, pronunciation, accents, and intonations in the audio should be kept as diverse and close to reality as possible. Developing such authentic content is a time-consuming and expensive effort but seeing the prospective results, I think, it is worth it.

#### **C. Learner-Centered Approach**

The learners should not be restricted to just listen to the audio and answer multiple-choice questions based on that. They should rather be made active participants in the activity.

Discussion and question-answer sessions can be a part of listening activity in the classroom. If some extra efforts are put, in this age of the technology, it should not be difficult to develop interactive listening activities that can be accessed through web or mobile apps. Learners can also be promoted to make recordings and submit them as homework. It will create a huge database of audio content, which cannot only be used for research purposes but also as teaching materials.

### **5. Teaching Listening Strategies**

Korean language learners generally try to understand each and everything that is being said, which is not an efficient way of listening. Learners should be explicitly taught how to listen using appropriate set of listening strategies, some of which are as following:

- Listening for the main idea
- Guessing the meaning
- Drawing inferences
- Looking for non-verbal cues
- Listening for keywords and specific details
- Clarifying

Different activities can be designed to teach the Korean language learners each of these listening strategies.

### **6. Pre and Post Listening Activities**

Research has proved that pre and post listening activities help improve the listening comprehension of the learners. Schema building activities preceding the listening activity can not only enhance the understanding of the content but also make the learners realize how they can activate proper schemata to improve comprehension in different situations. As schema building activities teacher can start some small talk about the topic of the content, can give some background information or ask some questions beforehand. Similarly post listening activities like discussion, question-answer and debate can help improve students' ability to store spoken content in short-term memory, process it efficiently and retain as schemata for future.

### **7. Conclusion**

In the last few decades, listening has been recognized as one of the crucial language skills and there has been significant increase in research on teaching listening in a foreign language classroom. This paper briefly discussed the theories of foreign language listening and analyzed the factors that make listening in real-life situations difficult for Korean language learners. The main reason why Korean language learners find listening comprehension challenging even after years of direct language instruction is that there are significant gaps between the listening activities in the classroom and those in real life situations. Speed, pronunciation, accent, tone, colloquialism, authenticity, and grammar &

vocabulary used are some of the major factors that distinguish listening inside the classroom from that on the outside. The paper also presented some suggestions to improve the pedagogy of Korean listening in a foreign classroom setting. There is a need of an improved approach to teach listening comprehension to Korean language learners. This is high time that Korean language researchers and educators take listening seriously and develop authentic instructional listening material. The teachers need to implement learner-centered approach in the listening classroom and listening strategies should be taught explicitly to the learners. There is also a need to incorporate pre and post learning activities. Implementing these methods efficiently and effectively will not only enhance the listening comprehension skills of Korean language learners but also their overall Korean language skills.

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