ABSTRACT
        This paper discusses the importance of listening
comprehension in the learning of English as a Second Language (ESL).
It is argued that more emphasis needs to be given to the neglected
skills of listening comprehension, since most training in oral
communication at the secondary and college level focuses on effective
speaking. The paper outlines the American Council on Teaching Foreign
Languages' (ACTFL) guidelines for listening proficiency for second
language acquisition, and reviews research on the relationship
between listening comprehension and language learning, auditory
identification and discrimination, listening materials, and the
testing of listening skills. The importance of the language
laboratory in developing listening skills is emphasized, and several
teaching methods that can be used to emphasize listening skills are
discussed. (Contains 24 references.) (MDM)

LISTENING: THE AGENT FOR POSITIVE CHANGE IN ESL

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Listening is the basis of the learning process,
repeating is the inevitable response to listening,
and putting words together in different combinations
is the natural outgrowth of anyone's desire to
communicate his desires and observations.

Eugene A. Nida

Listening comprehension is, without a doubt, the most important skill in learning a new language. Understanding a language is prerequisite to speaking, reading, and writing that language. When one considers the variety of text types and modes of speech, it becomes clear that successful comprehension depends upon the purposes for which the individual is listening. The design of appropriate comprehension task for oral discourse becomes a function of both the text type and the purpose for which the comprehender is listening.

Almost all training in oral communication in high school and college programs is in effective speaking. Listening is the forgotten stepchild in communication skills. The teaching of listening has been somewhat superficially treated. There seems to be very few published materials for the teaching of these particular skills, partly because comprehension processes are still not well understood and partly because teachers often assume that students will somehow develop listening skills naturally so they do not need to be actively taught.

Systematic investigation of listening comprehension as a skill was not of great concern until the 1970s. There is an increasing conviction among ESL teachers that listening comprehension is pivotal in the acquisition of a second language and listening skills ought, therefore, to be taught. Listening takes place at two steps in the communication process. First, the receiver must listen in order to decode and understand the original message. Then the sender becomes a listener when attempting to decode and understand subsequent feedback.

Colin Cherry unveiled the many problems our students face in the comprehension of speech which he calls the uncertainties of a spoken message:

> Communication proceeds in the face of a number of uncertainties and has the character of numerous inductive inferences being carried out concurrently.

He lists these uncertainties as

> a. Uncertainties of speech sounds, or acoustic patterning. Accents, tones, loudness may be varied; speakers may shout, sing, whisper, or talk with their mouth full.

b. Uncertainties of language and syntax. Sentence constructions differ; conversational language may be bound by rules of syntax. Vocabulary vary; words have many near-synonyms, popular usage, and special usages.
c. Environmental uncertainties. Conversations are disturbed by street noises, by telephone bells, and background chatter.
d. Recognition uncertainties. Recognition depends upon the peculiar past experience of the listener, upon familiarity with the speaker's speech habits, knowledge of language, and subject matter.

Cherry believes that speech communication works. It is structured as to possess redundancy and a variety of levels, to assist in overcoming these uncertainties. (1)

ACTFL GUIDELINES

American incompetence in foreign languages
is nothing short of scandalous, and it is
becoming worse.

Strength Through Wisdom, 1979

In 1986, the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) set some guidelines for listening proficiency for second language acquisition. The guidelines assume that all listening tasks take place in an authentic environment at a normal rate of speech using standard or near standard norms.

At the Beginning-Level Listening, students should be able to understand some short, learned utterances particularly where context strongly supports understanding and speech is clearly audible. Students should be able to comprehend words and phrases from simple questions, statements, high frequency commands, and courtesy formulas.

At the Intermediate-Level Listening, students should be able to understand sentence-length utterances which consist of recommendations of learned elements in some content areas. Content refers to the basic personal background and needs, social conventions and routine tasks, such as getting meals and receiving simple instructions and directions. Listening tasks not only pertain to spontaneous face-to-face conversations but also to short routine telephone conversations and some deliberate speech, such as simple announcements and reports over media.

At the Advanced-Level Listening, students are expected to understand main ideas and most details of connected discourse on a variety of topics beyond the immediacy of the situation. Listeners show an emerging awareness of culturally implied meaning beyond the surface meaning of the text.

At the Superior-Level Listening, students should be able to understand the main ideas of all speech on a standard dialect, including technical discussion in a field of specialization. Listeners

show some appreciation of aesthetic norms of the target language, of idioms, colloquialisms, and register shifting. Students should also be able to make inferences within the cultural framework of the target language. (2)

THE COMMUNICATION PARADIGM

The word information in communication theory
relates not so much to what to say, as to what
you could say. That is, information is a measure
of one's freedom of choice when one selects a message.

Warren Weaver

In the transmission of the message from sender to receiver, "noise" may interfere in the communication process. In a foreign language situation, unfamiliar elements of the message may be perceived in much the same way as noise. The listeners must therefore identify patterns, and their combination in the somewhat mutilated message which they have received, the reconstruction of the defective sections, and the organization of these patterns in a meaningful way. The organization of patterns relates to the listener's previous experience with words, syntactical groupings, situational context and cultural elements reflected in the message. (3)

LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Listening comprehension increases with growing
familiar with the vocabulary and structures of the
language and can provide one of the most enjoyable
activities associated with the language program.

Wilga M. Rivers

Listening comprehension in the teaching of English of Second Language involves two levels of activity:

a. The recognition level involves the identification of words and phrases in their structural interrelationships of time sequences, logical and modifying terms, and of phrases which are redundant interpolations adding nothing to the development of thought.

b. The second level of listening comprehension is the selection process, where the listener is drawing out from the communication those elements which seem to him to contain the gist of the message. The selection process requires the listener to concentrate on certain sound groupings. For students to be able to listen with ease to the foreign language in normal situations, they need thorough training at the recognition level and much practice in selecting specific details from the stream of sound.

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Listening comprehension is an optimal starting point of instruction in the target language. When first confronted with a foreign language, the students hear a barrage of meaningless noise. Gradually, after continued exposure to the language, they begin to recognize elements and patterns such as phonemes, intonation, words and phrases. When they are able to recognize the phonological, syntactic, and semantic codes of the language automatically, they have reached the first level, that of recognition.

Rivers suggests four stages for teaching listening skills in the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels of language learning:

   a. Identification;
   b. Identification and selection without retention;
   c. Identification and guided selection with short-term retention;
   d. Identification, selection, and long-term retention.

Rivers gives listening comprehension its rightful prominence and attention and she deals directly with teaching listening skills. She states that "listening comprehension has its peculiar problems which arise from the fleeting, immaterial nature of spoken utterances. (4)

In 1981, Nord proposed three progressive phases in the development of listening fluency:

   a. Semantic decoding;
   b. Listening ahead or anticipating the next word, phrase, or sentence;
   c. Discrepancy detection.

Progressing through these stages produces a "rather better cognitive map" which has a beneficial effect on the development of speaking, reading, and writing skills. (5)

In 1983, Krashen and Terrell suggested that a comprehensive listening approach to language teaching ought to be based on comprehensible input. The teacher can make the input comprehensible by associating it with visual cues and / or demonstrated actions. Language learners can thus benefit from guidance in directing their attention to input in many profitable ways. (6)

In 1986, Nagle and Sanders suggested that the listening comprehension material provided to the language learners must be rich and varied in order to allow the learner to build up a network of meaningful relationship in the target language. At every stage of language acquisition, carefully designed exercises in listening comprehension can facilitate further development of the cognitive map for the target language. (7)

THE SOUND SYSTEM

> We learn to recognize a characteristic rise and
> fall of the voice, varying pitch levels, recurrences
> of certain sound sequences which may seem somewhat
> like those of our own language, yet strongly different.
>
> Rivers and Temperley

When we begin to "hear attentively," we are said to be listening. The concept of "hearing" and "listening" are therefore not the same and should always be carefully distinguished.
Sounds may be recognized as being the same (recognition) or different (discrimination). An important question is how different two sounds have to be in order for the brain to perceive that they are different. Our ability to detect and discriminate sound is known as auditory acuity. In the word handbag, the [nd] is pronounced as [m], because of the influence of the following [b]; but the word is still interpreted as hand and not ham.

In 1945, Fries held that, in learning a new language, the first problem to consider is "mastery of the sound system." One must not only hear distinct sound features but also be able to approximate the production. (8)

One of the best ways for a student to learn to hear differences is to be able to discriminate in the production of minimal pairs such as

bad	bed
cat	cut
land	lend
mad	mud
tad	ted
tat	tut

Many pairs of words differ by only one sound - cap and cab, for instance, but when we examine the waveforms of such words, we find that the differences between them are often simultaneously decoded in several parts of the speech signal. The contrast between cap and cab is partly due to acoustic differences found at the end of these words, but it is also due to differences between the vowels - the 'a' of cab being much longer than that of cap. Yet in listening to speech we ignore the vowel difference and "hear" only the consonant difference. (9)

In 1976, Chastain suggested the three components which make up the levels of stages of developing skills:

a) Sound discrimination (e.g., recognizing minimal pairs, phonemes);
b) Auditory memory;
c) Comprehension.

Chastain recommends going from the simple to the complex in terms of difficulty factors and from short to long in terms of content for developing memory span. He offers a list of activities which could be used to help listening skills, such as minimal pairs, drills, games, dialogues prepared with classmates, and the like. (10) In 1983, Brown and Yule suggested that "the aim of the listening comprehension exercise should be for the student to arrive successfully at a reasonable interpretation" of the utterances.(11)

CONTRACTIONS AND REDUCED FORMS

Fries advocated the use of contractions and reduced forms since they are more accurate in the speed of usual conversation. The reduced forms refer collectively to the process of contractions, elision, liaison, assimilation, and reduction, such as "wanna," "howarya", "isn't", "there's."

The reduced forms increase students' overall English listening ability. The goal of this informal speech or "relaxed pronunciation" is to help students understand the relationship between carefully articulated English and the English of quick, relaxed, informal speech.
Fries implies that production and recognition are independent. Listening skills will develop as a result of learning skills.

THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY

> There is no question that the effectiveness of
> any language laboratory depends to a large
> extent on the degree of participation of the students.
>
> Richard Epting and J. Donald Bowen

The best-known technological aid in second language teaching is undoubtedly the language laboratory - a room, usually divided into booths, where students can listen individually to tape recordings of foreign language material, and where they may record and playback their own responses, while being monitored by a teacher. When the laboratories were first introduced, they were heralded as a technique that usually would vastly improve the rate and quality of foreign language learning. They would take the burden of repetitive drills from the teacher, provide more opportunities for the learners to practice listening and speaking, and enable them to develop at their own rates and monitor their own progress.

Many schools were quick to install expensive laboratory equipment. However, within a few years, it became apparent that there would be no breakthrough. The expected improvement did not emerge, and the popularity of the language lab showed a marked decline.

Many ESL instructors have begun to question whether the language laboratory is making a valuable contribution to the teaching of ESL. J. Reed finds it extremely difficult to accurately evaluate student's performance in a lab setting. The language laboratory with its elaborate systems of booths and equipment isolates the students from the teacher thus making the diagnosis of student's progress troublesome.

In 1967, Russell Campbell examined the more immediate objective of the language laboratory as a learning and listening device:

> For a number of students of modern languages, the long-range goal of eventually learning the language and the anticipated satisfaction of being able to communicate in it is sufficient motivation for their sustained interest and study. For a yet large number, there is an apparent need for a more immediate objective if they are to apply their skills in the classroom or language laboratory. (13)

In 1968, Robert Allen stated that the reason to believe that most students do not benefit from listening to their own responses is because the laboratory's built-in mechanism for self-evaluation, and the delayed comparison cycle have proven to be fairly ineffective (14)

In 1970, Richard Yorkey noted that there are many different ways to present listening comprehension materials and recommended to combine listening comprehension and note-taking skills. To help the students develop their note-taking abilities, Yorkey has provided taped paragraphs in which the organization is prompted by grammatical and electrical sound cues. (15)

TEACHING METHODS

In the long search for the best way of teaching a foreign language, several approaches, or methods, have been devised. Each method is based on a particular view of language learning and usually recommends a specific set of techniques and materials. The emphasis on listening skills varies from method to method. The Grammar Translation Approach dominated early work in modern language teaching. The vast majority of ESL teachers recognize that this approach does little to the spoken language needs, does not enhance listening skills, and does not meet the interests of today's ESL students.

The Direct Method, also known as the oral or natural method, is based on the active involvement of the learner in speaking and listening to the foreign language in realistic everyday situations. This learning approach relies heavily on listening comprehension and places emphasis on good pronunciation.

In the Audio-Lingual Method, also known as the aural-oral method, the listening skills are pivotal for a better understanding of the natural pronunciation and spoken conversation. Since language is seen as a process of habit formation, structural patterns in dialogues about everyday situations are imitated and drilled first in choral speech, then individually, until the learner's responses become automatic. The audiolingual method of language teaching has undergone a critical reevaluation fostered by the advocates of a more "cognitive" approach. Teachers have recognized the need to make drills more communicative and have been developing techniques to do so. Rivers finds many lab drills force students to utter totally untrue, unreal, or unnatural statements. She suggests creating situations which are relevant to students' lives and then forcing them to think about the meaning and consequences of what they say in such situations.

The main emphasis of Suggestopedia is listening and speaking. Language learning is a combination of memorization of word groups and corresponding grammatical rules along with immediate practical application through realistic dialogue and review. During the seance, students lean back and breathe deeply and rhythmically, using yoga relaxation techniques, which are intended to heighten concentration. In Suggestopedia, listening skills play a major role since the emphasis is on learning informal communication and no attention is drawn to grammatical errors. Learners listen to both language and music in an atmosphere of total relaxation and enjoyment.

James Asher stresses listening comprehension in his Total Physical Response (TPR) program, because he believes that in the time-limited language course, the instructor should concentrate on the skill that has the largest positive transference to the other language skills. His research has also indicated that when students learn speaking and listening together, listening comprehension is greatly delayed. TPR is based in the belief that listening comprehension should be developed fully before any active oral participation from students is expected. Understanding of the spoken language must be developed in advance of speaking. The active listening of the kind used in TPR approach gives students an opportunity to separate a stream of sounds into meaningful units. (16) Asher attributes the current failure to produce students fluent in the language to the fact that most language teaching is multiple in dimension - involving the simultaneous presentation of different skills. Asher advocates a change to "serial learning" of the four skills, with "listening fluency" the first to be acquired. His experiments with TPR, which combines listening with enacting, showed that students who learned by this strategy were superior in retention of the second/foreign language to those of control groups.

The Rapid Acquisition of a Foreign Language Method developed by Harris Winitz and James Reed stress listening comprehension and discourage speaking, permitting students to give only nonverbal responses until a high degree of comprehension has been achieved. As essential element in their program, they limit utterances to an average of eight words and rely heavily on problem solving as the most effective approach to learning rules.

The Audio-Motor Unit or Listening Comprehension Strategy was devised by Kalivoda, Morain and Elkins. It is a device for teaching listening comprehension. Using a visual aid and an audible stimulus initially to elicit a physical response, this strategy brings sight, hearing, and kinesic participation into interplay. Later the visible stimulus is dropped and the student relies only upon the oral command to motivate his physical response. According to the authors, the regular use of carefully prepared audio-motor units can provide listening comprehension activities which increase knowledge of lexical and structural items, add dimension to cultural understanding and enliven the learning situation with zest and humor. (17)

Gattegno, in Silent Way, encourages early listening to tapes and disks of different languages, so that students gradually come to recognize characteristics of the language they are learning. The classroom teacher can introduce this element of practice in identification by playing tapes of English songs.

TESTING LISTENING SKILLS

A complex array of influences on proficiency
assessment is the changing nature of policy
demands in which tests and curricula
play a significant role.

J. Michael O'Malley

There have been dramatic shifts on views on language proficiency theory and testing over the past decade that have dated most the procedures used for language assessment in instructional programs for ESL students. These shifts have occurred in parallel with changes in curriculum and instruction for ESL students that have also influenced the types of tests that are needed to test listening skills. (18)

Test of listening skills include auditory identification and sound discrimination, e.g., identification of sounds, discrimination of foreign sounds, discrimination of English sounds, implicit discrimination, rhyming, intonation, stress and accent. Andrew Cohen gives an example of a listening test for ESL:

AUDITORY IDENTIFICATION AND DISCRIMINATION

a. Identification of sound

- The student hears a sound in isolation and must identify it.
- The sound is in the context of a word, possibly in a sentence.

b. Discrimination of foreign sounds from similar native-language sounds.

- The respondent is to indicate which words or sounds are not English

c. Discrimination of English sounds among themselves:

- The respondent is to indicate whether two vowel sounds are the same or different.
- The respondent indicates which sound of three is different from the other two.
- These sounds could be in a sentence context

    It's a ship
    It's a sheep

d. The respondent is asked to choose the distractor :

> The cat was soft
> The cot was soft

e. Implicit ...iscr:mination

   - The r · .x·̀ .ent hears a phrase and then must indicate the
   appro₊ ˙ .ᴕ continuation:

   > Question: He was given the sheep as a present
   > Response: He likes farm animals

f. Rhyming

   - The respondent is to indicate whether two words rhyme:

   > Question: Fat - Seat
   > Response: Don't rhyme   ·

   - The respondent is to mark the one of the three words that doesn't rhyme with the
     other
   >   fit / hit / meat

g. Intonation

   - The respondent is to indicate whether two phrases have the same intonation
     - The respondent is to mark the linear pattern that most
       closely depicts the intonation curve of the speaker
     - The respondent must determine the meaning of the phrase from the intonation.

h. Stress and Accent

   - The respondent must choose the word that is accented on a
     different syllable from the other two.
   - Respondent of the same native language group could be asked to
     translate an English phrase into their own language.
   - The respondent is to mark the sentence that indicates correct primary stress.

Factors to be considered in the testing of the language skills are:

a. The reliability of a test. Reliability as to whether a test given to the same respondents
   a second time would yield the same results.
b. The validity of the test. Validity refers to whether the test actually measures what it
   purports to measure. (19)

LISTENING MATERIALS

Listening to authentic tapes recorded by native
speakers who are not teachers provide one of the
best opportunities for students to have real contact
with the life and thought of English-speaking people.

Rivers and Temperley

In material and activities for listening comprehension, ESL teachers have the tendency to make them more difficult to comprehend than they realize. This is because they do not give enough consideration to the differences between edited, or artificially constructed messages and an authentic output of speech in a natural interaction. (20)

Most texts in listening comprehension do not attempt to solve the problem of teaching students to comprehend live or natural language in the mouth of native speakers of American English in an informal way. Some other texts are prepared to enhance listening comprehension. Morley's Improving Aural Comprehension offers step by step exercises to help students train their ear to listen for specific items, including stress and inton. ·n as well as to aid them in developing their memory span, since the exercises become longer and more complex. The exercises progress in difficulty and length and include such items as mathematical figures, acronyms, times, dates, places, specific words, and so forth. (21)

Listening comprehension materials should be well integrated thematically with the rest of the learning program; otherwise, discussions of related subject may be necessary to stimulate student's thinking.

CONCLUSION

When selecting learning activities, we must always
remember that our goal is for the students to be able
to interact freely with others: to understand what
others wish to communicate in the broadest sense,
and to be able to convey to others what
they themselves wish to share.

Wilga M. Rivers and Mary S Temperley

There is some evidence that performance on listening comprehension tests is related to performance on inductive reasoning, verbal comprehension and certain types of memory tests. The view that there is a distinctive listening factor in the second language acquisition process has been asked by T. G. Sticht. (22)

Linguists and psychologists seem to diverge on the listening and learning issues. Bever maintains that the grammatical rules of language we apply in language learning are different and that we employ perceptual strategies for surface scanning of what we are hearing, stopping to penetrate the underlying relations only to resolve ambiguities or untangle complexities. (23) Chomsky instead maintains that knowledge of the same grammatical rules of language is basic to both listening and speaking. He stated that "a generative grammar is not a model for speaker or hearer. It attempts to characterize in the most neutral possible term the knowledge of the language that provides the basis for the actual use of the language by a speaker-hearer." (24)

Despite their divergence, interesting insights can be derived from various linguistic and psychological schools of thought, each of which emphasizes a different face of the complicated processes of listening and receiving messages.

Research into the best means of achieving a coherent linguistic approach - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - is the major aim of the field of educational linguistics.
When ESL students arrive in school, they experience a different linguistic world. They meet students from unfamiliar regional, social, and ethnic backgrounds, whose linguistic norms differ greatly from their own. They encounter a social situation in which levels of formal and informal speech are carefully distinguished, and standards of correctness emphasized. They have to learn a new range of linguistic skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And they find themselves having to talk about what they are doing, which requires that they learn a special technical vocabulary - a "language talking about language," or metalanguage. Comprehension theory suggests that listening comprehension activities facilitate the natural development of linguistic knowledge in a setting which is affectively conducive to language acquisition. Teachers have begun to stress ESL students' listening ability as the major factor influencing their success in the learning of other areas.

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