

# Teaching Listening as a Communicative Skill in Military English

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## Abstract

This article deals with teaching listening in English for Specific Purposes and more specifically in Military English. There are presented different approaches on listening and ways on teaching it in ESP. Active listening it is seen as one of the most productive and applicable approach in teaching ESP students how to master the skill of listening. The student is considered not only a good listener, a good receiver, but a good speaker as well, who gives life to the conversation that is taking place and who is always looking for something more from the co-speaker. There are also considered the listening micro-skills that help the student understand how listening process functions. Besides that, it is treated the importance and the role of listening in Military English. So, the Military English teachers have to teach the students how to listen, to make them comprehend the process, and later test their listening skills. In order to make listening as useful as possible, we first need to know what our students' needs are and in which situation they are going to use listening in the future when they are back to their work.

**Keywords:** ESP, Military English, teaching listening skill, listening needs, listening situations.

## Introduction

The ability to follow a native English speaker in a specific professional field it is crucial in the situations of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This is especially important for students who follow a lecture at university or for an employee who works in a specialized sector. Therefore, because of the importance that listening has in ESP, there have been conducted several researches in this respect. According to Dudley-Evans & St. John (2000), in ESP situations, doctors and other professional people attend conferences and listen to presentations; technicians have to listen to and understand instructions; business people and other professionals listen to policy presentations. That is the reason why teaching listening in ESP has been the main domain of many studies.

Comprehension of a lecture, seminar or business presentation involve a two-stage process, where the first phase has to do with the processing of the language, whereas the second one considers the change to background knowledge of the topic that results from the understanding of the language. The process of listening has much in common with the reading process (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 2000).

The skill of listening in ESP differs from the listening in English for General Purposes (EGP), even though they have a lot of characteristics in common. One of the main differences is the fact that students who follow an ESP course have actually a level of language knowledge, usually an intermediate level, which allows them to communicate in English. Besides this, teaching materials require this category of students to focus on the development of specific vocabulary in their work or study field. For example, in the aviation industry, the pilots, the air traffic controllers and the team that operates on the ground it is supposed to use and to recognise the specific expressions of their own field, in this way they will be able to communicate in an effective way with their colleagues from other countries. The same situation is faced in the defence and security field. Officers, non-commissioned officers and professional soldiers should know and master well the military terminology used in their branch specialty: land, air or naval force. Thanks to this language knowledge, they will have the possibility to communicate with their international partners in different kinds of trainings, joint exercises and multinational missions.

So, it is highly recommended that students of ESP should be trained well to improve their basic processes of listening comprehension, as well as to be assisted in overcoming the problems they encounter as listeners of second language.

## 1. Literature Review

### 1.1 Studying listening in ESP

The purpose of listening in teaching a foreign language is to develop active listener. The same purpose is even in specific fields of ESP listening. According to Brown (1990) the term "active listener" refers to "someone who constructs reasonable interpretations on the basis of an underspecified input and recognizes when more specific information is required. The active listener asks for the needed information", (Brown, 1990). Whereas, Dudley-Evans & St. John (2000) state that 'good listening is vital in spoken interactions, particularly in business, and goes beyond understanding the words and the key points; it is a skill and an art'.

According to Gogh (2002), active listening can occur in all types of listening contexts and is not restricted to situations where the individual is interacting with others. It is needed when one is talking to another

person (interactive listening) or when listening to a talk or a lecture (one - way listening). In interactive listening, listeners engage their interlocutors in repeating and explaining messages to obtain greater clarity in their attempt to construct an understanding of the message. Whereas in one - way listening, where the context does not allow them to do this, active listeners will make use of appropriate strategies to cope with difficulties and facilitate their comprehension by making predictions or drawing inferences, as well as monitoring and evaluating their understanding (Goh 2002, Vandergrift 2003).

Active listening also involves paraphrasing and summarising so that the speaker knows that his messages have been heard. Thus, active listening can involve speaking; it about showing that we have been listening and understanding, and not thinking about other matters. The purpose is not to take over the turn, but to encourage the speaker so that we find out more (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 2000).

### 1.2 Listening micro-skills

There are needed several micro-skills in order to develop as good as possible the listening skill in ESP. Richards (1983) lists the following micro-skills:

Ability to:

- ✓ Identify the purpose and scope of monologue,
- ✓ Identify the topic of lecture and follow topic development,
- ✓ Recognise the role of discourse markers,
- ✓ Recognise key lexical items related to subject/topic,
- ✓ Deduce meanings of words from context,
- ✓ Recognise function of intonation to signal information structure (for example pitch, volume, pace, key).

A student of ESP has to clarify the comprehension processes of listening and in order to achieve this he has to take into consideration the understanding skills that are used by the effective listener. These understanding skills can be used singly or integrated with other ones to fulfil the defined objective. So, according to Vandergrift and Goh (2012) there are some micro-skills related to listening:

- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| ✓ Listen for details              | understand and identify specific information  |
| ✓ Listen for main ideas           | understand and summarize key points in a text   |
| ✓ Listen for global understanding | understand the gist of the message  |
| ✓ Listen and infer                | fill in the gaps in one's understanding by using knowledge about the language forms and use, and relevant prior knowledge |
| ✓ Listen and predict              | anticipate what one will hear   |
| ✓ Listen selectively              | pay attention to specific parts of the message by ignoring other parts.   |

### 1.3 Teaching listening skill in Military English

Teaching and learning listening comprehension in Military English (ME), as a branch of ESP, is considered quite a challenge for teachers and military students. So, military students, who attend English courses, are usually adult learners and at the same time professionals in military field. Listening, as a receptive skill, it is usually found very difficult by the military students, even though it is supposed to be easier than speaking and writing which are productive skills.

Military students are supposed to master well intermediate language knowledge, but many of them are lower than this required level. Therefore, this becomes an obstacle in developing the listening skill equally to all the class members. The teachers of ME have to work individually with each student in order to identify their gaps in listening skills and to help them overcome these problems.

Listening skill is one of the four main skills that is tested at the end of the ME course by STANAG 6001 test, a test that is conducted by all NATO members. Therefore, they can be able to communicate among them on standardised Military English. So, ME students have to be well prepared and learned before this test. But, several teachers of ME tend to test their listening comprehension right away by practising samples of STANAG listening tests. In fact, ME teachers have to learn them first how to listen effectively, by using communicative activities for listening, by making the students listen for the main idea, for details, for the main gist, for specific information, for inference etc.. So the teacher should pay a great deal of attention to the process of listening, to its micro-skills and to the listening strategies rather than the desired product of listening, which is expected to come eventually at the end of the course.

Teaching listening in ME means to teach and to recognise well the military terminology, NATO acronyms, operational language and everything that has to do with the army. So, learning the specific vocabulary related to this field is another challenge, not just for students, but even for the ME teachers sometimes, who are experts in English language knowledge, but not in the specific military terms. On the other hand, military

students, who are professionals in the army, recognise this specific vocabulary better than the teachers. So, a good cooperation between the teacher and the ME students will result in a productive way of teaching and learning the military terminology which will be used in listening and other skills as well.

Active listening for ME students involves a lot of professional activities such as trainings abroad or at home, participation in international conferences, in presentations, in military briefings, exercising with multinational troops, deployed in peacekeeping or combat missions or working in NATO structures and General Headquarter in Brussels, Belgium. That is why enhancing their listening skill is essential, so they can be able to communicate efficiently whenever it is required.

In order to provide good listening activities and teaching materials that are related to ME, the teacher should know in advance what the students' needs are, what gaps they need to fill and what their objectives are. After identifying all these elements, the teacher will plan, prepare and bring to class materials and listening activities that will fulfil the students' expectations and needs.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology of the research article includes the way this study is conducted. The paper aims to find out the listening situations that are most used by military students in their place of work and to evaluate the students' difficulties in using listening skill in these situations as well as their importance.

### 2.1 Type of the research

This research paper deals with questionnaires and observation methods. The use of questionnaires presents information gathered by the study participants, whereas the observation method provides the long-term experience of the researcher as a military English teacher.

### 2.2 The participants

The research was carried out in the Foreign Languages Centre (FLC), at the Academy of the Armed Forces, in Tirana, Albania. English language proficiency courses conducted in the FLC are in accordance with specific Standardized Agreement (STANAG 6001) levels, which is a NATO agreement among member countries for an acceptable linguistic competence that enables cooperation. Parts of this study were fifty-five military students who attended Military English courses in the FLC. All the students were officers and other militaries that come from different forces of the Albanian Armed Forces. The participants belonged to five different groups:

1. Two groups of level 2 2 2 2 (equal to proficiency level of B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, (CEF) )
2. Two groups of level 3 2 3 2 (equal to proficiency level of B2 according to CEF)
3. One group of level 3 3 3 3 (equal to proficiency level of C1 according to CEF).

### 2.3 Questionnaire

In this paper it was used only one questionnaire for the military students. The questionnaire was written in the Albanian language in order to make it easier for the participants to express their own opinions. It included two sections:

- Section 1: The respondents were asked about their gender and how long they had been learning Military English.
- Section 2: This part of the questionnaire included three different questions regarding a set of 16 listening situations in military environment.

## 3. Results

After gathering, analysing and evaluating all the data taken by the respondents, the results that came out of this study will be presented as follows:

### Section 1. Demographic information on the military students.

In the first section of the questionnaire the military students were asked to give information on their gender, learning experience in English and about the English group they were attending. The following table will present further details:

Group Name	Group Size	Gender		Average years in English learning			
		Female	Male	0-3	4-7	7-10	Over 10
2 2 2 2	12	2	10	7	4	1	-
2 2 2 2	13	4	9	8	5	-	-
3 2 3 2	10	3	7	6	3	1	-
3 2 3 2	12	4	8	4	4	2	2
3 3 3 3	8	2	6	2	2	2	2

Table 1. Demographic information on the students

Figure 1 reports on the gender of the responded students, where it can easily be seen that most of the participants in this study, 72.7%, are male students, whereas 1/3 or 27.3% of them are female students. This is a well-known fact, as most of the Army members are males, even though in recent decades this ratio has been changed even in the Albanian Army, where the number of women working in the military structures has been increased.

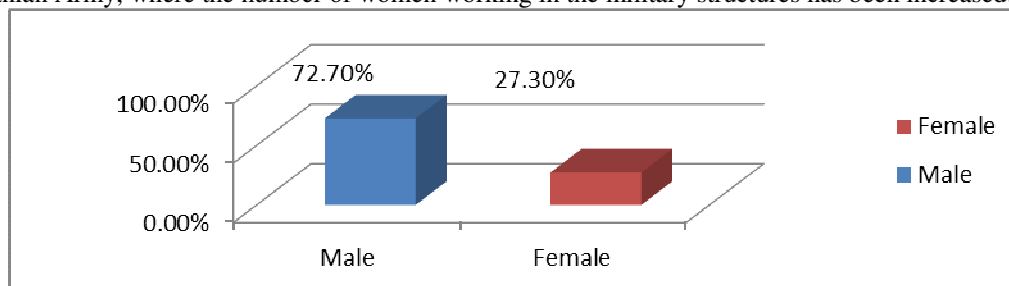


Figure 1. Students' gender

In the following chart it is noticed that most of the students, 49.1%, almost 1/2, have been studied English for a period of 0-3 years. 32.7% have studied for 4-7 years, 10.9% for 7-10 years and only 7.3% have studied English for over 10 years. So, half of the students have no long experience in learning English.

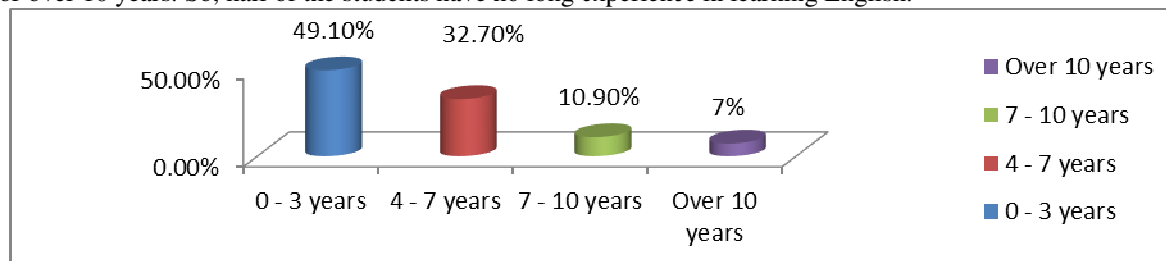


Figure 2. Students' experience in studying English

**Section 2.** Questions on the frequency of use of listening situations in military environment, the difficulty they face in using them and the importance of these situations to the students.

Question 1. How often do you have to use the listening skill in English in the following situations in your professional life?

Situations	Very often		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	Std.	%	Std.	%	Std.	%	Std.	%	Std.	%
Orders	2	3.7%	8	14.5%	11	20%	28	<b>50.9%</b>	6	10.9%
Speeches	4	7.3%	11	20%	25	45.4%	9	16.4%	6	10.9%
Presentations	8	<b>14.5%</b>	27	<b>49.1%</b>	10	18.2%	7	12.8%	3	5.4%
Briefings	9	<b>16.4%</b>	30	<b>54.5%</b>	8	14.5%	6	10.9%	2	3.7%
Official meetings	5	9.2%	8	14.5%	9	16.4%	25	<b>45.4%</b>	8	14.5%
Joint international exercises	4	7.3%	28	<b>50.9%</b>	11	20%	8	14.5%	4	7.3%
Peacekeeping/ combat missions	3	5.4%	14	25.4%	27	<b>49.1%</b>	6	10.9%	5	9.2%
Search & Rescue Operations	3	5.4%	21	38.1%	22	40%	7	12.8%	2	3.7%
Trainings	13	<b>23.6%</b>	28	<b>50.9%</b>	10	18.2%	4	7.3%	-	-
International conferences	5	9.2%	18	32.7%	16	29%	10	18.2%	6	10.9%
Reports	6	10.9%	10	18.2%	22	40%	14	25.5%	3	5.4%
Formal/ informal discussions	7	12.8%	9	16.4%	30	<b>54.3%</b>	5	9.2%	4	7.3%
Phone conversations	6	10.9%	8	14.5%	32	<b>58.3%</b>	6	10.9%	3	5.4%
Radio communications	2	3.7%	5	9.2%	12	21.7%	27	<b>49%</b>	9	<b>16.4%</b>
Military/ Civilian radio stations	4	7.3%	5	9.2%	6	10.9%	25	<b>45.4%</b>	15	<b>27.2%</b>
Patrolling	1	1.8%	4	7.3%	4	7.3%	6	10.9%	40	<b>72.7%</b>

Table 2. Students' opinions on the frequency of use of listening skill in different military situations

The above table presents in details the students' answers about the use of listening skill in different situations in military life. So, under the heading 'very often', most percent of the answers, 23.6%, go for trainings, 16.4% go for briefings and 14.5% go for presentations. Even under the heading 'often' most of the answers are for

briefings, presentations, trainings and joint international exercises. So, 54.5% of the students report they that use listening skills in different briefings held in English, 50.9% use it in joint international exercises and in trainings, whereas 49.1% in presentations. 58.3% of the students say that they sometimes use listening skill in phone conversations, 54.3% sometimes listen to formal/informal discussions and 49.1% sometimes use this skill in peacekeeping/combat missions. 50.9% of the answered students rarely use listening skill in orders, 49% rarely listen to radio communications and 45.4% rarely use listening in official meetings and in military/civilian radio stations. Lastly, 72.7% state they never use listening skill in patrolling situations, 27.2% never listen to military/civilian radio stations in English and 16.4% never use listening for radio communication.

Question 2. How often do you face difficulty in using listening skill in English in the following situations in your professional life?

Situations	Very often		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	Std.	%	Std.	%	Std.	%	Std.	%	Std.	%
Orders	8	14.6%	10	18.2%	22	40%	12	<b>21.8%</b>	3	5.4%
Speeches	20	<b>36.3%</b>	15	27.1%	13	23.6%	5	9.3%	2	3.7%
Presentations	18	<b>32.7%</b>	16	<b>29%</b>	12	21.8%	4	7.3%	5	9.2%
Briefings	15	27.2%	13	23.6%	14	25.6%	10	18.2%	3	5.4%
Official meetings	17	<b>30.8%</b>	22	<b>40%</b>	10	18.2%	4	7.3%	2	3.7%
Joint international exercises	9	16.3%	11	20%	27	<b>49.1%</b>	6	10.9%	2	3.7%
Peacekeeping/ combat missions	12	21.8%	15	27.1%	8	14.5%	17	<b>30.9%</b>	3	5.4%
Search& Rescue Operations	11	20%	16	<b>29%</b>	14	25.6%	8	14.5%	6	10.9%
Trainings	11	20%	14	25.5%	15	27.2%	8	14.5%	7	<b>12.8%</b>
International conferences	18	<b>32.7%</b>	25	<b>45.4%</b>	7	12.8%	3	5.4%	2	3.7%
Reports	5	9.2%	12	21.8%	9	16.4%	18	<b>32.6%</b>	11	<b>20%</b>
Formal/ informal discussions	6	10.9%	9	16.4%	28	<b>50.9%</b>	4	7.3%	8	<b>14.5%</b>
Phone conversations	20	<b>36.3%</b>	16	<b>29%</b>	10	18.2%	5	9.2%	4	7.3%
Radio communications	18	<b>32.7%</b>	15	27.2%	11	20%	6	10.9%	5	9.2%
Military/civilian radio stations	20	<b>36.3%</b>	12	21.8%	8	14.5%	10	18.2%	5	9.2%
Patrolling	11	20%	9	16.4%	25	<b>45.4%</b>	4	7.3%	6	10.9%

Table 3. Students' opinions on the frequency of difficulty in using listening skill in different military situations

Regarding the answers given about the Question 2 of the questionnaire, 36.3% of the students very often face difficulty in listening during speeches, phone conversations and while they listen to military/civilian radio stations, whereas 32.7% of them find listening very often difficult when they participate in presentations and international conferences as well as during radio communication. Only 30.8% of the students very often encounter difficulty with official meeting. Even under the heading 'often', most of the answers go for the same situations as above. So, 45.4% of the students state that they often face difficulty with international conferences, 40% of them with official meetings and 29% with presentations and search and rescue operations. Concerning the third heading 'sometimes', 50.9% of the students sometimes face difficulty with formal/informal discussions, 49.1% with joint international exercises and 45.4% sometimes find difficulty in listening while patrolling. 32.6% of the students rarely face difficulty in using listening while reporting, 30.9% of them in peacekeeping/combat missions and only 21.8% rarely face difficulty in listening while taking orders. 20% of the students state that they never find listening difficult in reports, 14.5% never find it difficult in formal/informal discussions and only 12.8% never think listening is difficult while they are training.

Question 3. How important is listening skill in ME in the following situations in your place of work?

Situations	Very important		Important		Somewhat important		Little important		No important	
	Std.	%	Std.	%	Std.	%	Std.	%	Std.	%
Orders	11	20%	25	45.4%	14	25.4%	5	9.2%	-	-
Speeches	8	14.5%	10	18.2%	27	49.1%	7	12.8%	3	5.4%
Presentations	10	18.2%	32	58.2%	8	14.5%	3	5.4%	2	3.7%
Briefings	15	27.2%	23	41.8%	11	20%	2	3.7%	4	7.3%
Official meetings	5	9.2%	13	23.6%	5	9.2%	20	36.4%	12	21.6%
Joint international exercises	7	12.7%	12	21.8%	22	40%	9	16.4%	5	9.2%
Peacekeeping/ combat missions	8	14.5%	15	27.3%	13	23.6%	11	20%	8	14.5%
Search & Rescue Operations	5	9.2%	9	16.4%	25	45.4%	12	21.8%	4	7.3%
Trainings	10	18.2%	27	49.1%	11	20%	5	9.1%	2	3.7%
International conferences	6	10.9%	8	14.5%	30	54.5%	6	10.9%	5	9.2%
Reports	9	16.3%	22	40%	15	27.2%	7	12.8%	2	3.7%
Formal/informal discussions	7	12.8%	10	18.2%	27	49.1%	8	14.5%	3	5.4%
Phone conversations	4	7.3%	7	12.7%	10	18.2%	23	41.8%	11	20%
Radio communications	3	5.4%	5	9.2%	15	27.2%	20	36.4%	12	21.8%
Military/civilian radio stations	4	7.3%	9	16.4%	7	12.8%	23	41.8%	12	21.8%
Patrolling	2	3.7%	5	9.2%	6	10.8%	24	43.6%	18	23.7%

Table 4. Students' perceptions on the importance of listening skill in different military situations.

Most of the students, 27.2%, consider listening very important for briefings, 20% of them for orders and 18.2% for presentations and for trainings. 58.2% say they listening skill is important for presentations, 49.1% for trainings and 45.4% for orders. Whereas, 54.5% of them state they find listening somewhat important for international conferences, 49.1% for speeches and for formal/informal discussions and 45.4% for search and rescue operations. 43.6% of the asked students think that listening is little important for patrolling, 41.8% find listening it little important in phone conversations and while listening to military/civilian radio stations and 36.4% for official meetings and for radio communications. There is also a group of students that think that listening is no important at all for some situations. So, 23.7% say that listening is no important for them in patrolling, 21.8% for radio communications and for military civilian radio stations and 20% for phone conversations.

### Recommendations

The role and importance of listening in English for Specific Purposes has been increasing year after year. The professionals and academic students acknowledge and appreciate this importance of listening to communicate their written or spoken messages to their colleagues or classmates. In order to achieve this objective of communication through listening, the students have to comprehend first how the listening process functions. First of all, they have to process the language used in listening, then to relate it with their background knowledge about the spoken topic. Integrating these two phases will help the student understand what it is being said and it will enable him to answer back and participate in the communication.

Recently there have been suggested some approaches in teaching listening in ESP, but the one that describes the 'active listener' seems to be the adequate one for teaching listening in a communicative way. So, active listening can happen in all kinds of contexts and situations, individually, in pairs or in groups and it may require interaction or not.

In order to listen actively, ESP students should:

- Have relevant knowledge to support the cognitive processing;
- Use listening skills to facilitate comprehension and interaction;
- Engage in meta-cognitive processes to enhance and regulate their own comprehension and listening development (Vandergrift and Goh 2012).

Teaching listening in Military English involves all the characteristic of listening in ESP that were discussed above. Teachers who apply 'active listening' approach in teaching Military English will provide 'good listeners' in their respective classes. As it was presented in this study, it is really significant to know beforehand

the students' perception about the use of listening skill in certain military situations, about the difficulty they face while listening in these real life situations and about its importance in such situations. Being aware of all these facts, will help the teacher recognise his students' potential in listening skill, their gaps and what they want to accomplish during the ME course.

So, as it is evaluated in Table 2, most of the military students use listening skill very often or often in presentations, briefings, trainings and joint international exercises. Whereas, they rarely or never use this skill for radio communication, to listen to military/civilian radio stations, in orders, official meetings and patrolling. After all, if the Military English teachers know in advance what listening situations their students will deal with in the future, they will be able to find, prepare and bring in class communicative activities that best fit these situations. As military students are professional officers or other army members, the teachers should prepare them well by filling their listening needs in accordance with their job.

Whereas in Table 3, the military students, who took part in this study, think that they very often or often face difficulty in listening while they are taking part in speeches, presentations, official meeting, international conferences, phone conversations, radio communications or while they listen to military/civilian radio stations. So, most of them find difficult the formal use of English language and the conversations that are not face to face, but through other means of communications such as radio or phone. On the other hand, the students think it is easier to use listening skill in taking orders, in serving in peacekeeping/combat missions or while they are being reported, as well as they have no difficulty at all with listening in situations such as: training, reports or formal/informal discussions. So, it is easier for military students to use listening when they are in presence of other speakers and in situations when the English language it is not very formal or much complicated for them.

After evaluating Table 4, we conclude that military students find listening very important or important in orders, presentations, briefings and trainings. Even though they find these listening situations in they work very difficult, as it was seen in Table 3, they are still aware of their importance in their military carrier. Anyway, there are some listening situations that there are of little importance or no importance to them. So it is listening in patrolling, listening to radio communication, to military/civilian radio stations or to phone conversations. In fact, there are the same situations that they find very difficult in Table 3, expect patrolling. Therefore, we can say that some of the listening situations that seem difficult to military students are classified by them as not important. In a way, they try to avoid such situations, they tend not to use listening at all or furthermore, not to be part of these situations, unless they are obliged to. In short, it is teacher's responsibility, to make use of such situations in class, to apply listening activities that are related directly with these 'undesired' situations. In this way, the students will be able to overcome the problems and difficulties they encounter while using listening in different military situations.

Moreover, McDonough (2010) states that materials should be evaluated for their overall goals and should be ensured that there is fitness for purpose based on the needs of learners in a specific area of studies or work.

To conclude, we suggest ESP teachers and especially ME teachers to be open-minded to new concepts of teaching listening and to pay more attention to the teaching listening process than the listening product. After teaching well comprehension of the listening process, the desirable product will come eventually. To support better this whole process of listening, it is better to employ real life situations that are strongly related with the future carrier of the student.

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