

Designing Lessons for EFL Listening Comprehension Classes

Developing the listening comprehension skill is important for students, especially in a communicative language environment where activities often revolve around interactions between English language learners. According to Brown (2001), students with well-developed listening comprehension skills are able to participate more effectively in class. For this reason, listening comprehension practice positively influences second language learning, and lessons based on this skill are regularly taught in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom.

When teachers design listening comprehension lessons, they should follow some basic principles that serve as useful guides for successful activities. This article presents the rationale for some of these basic principles, including descriptions for (1) motivating students to focus on the learning objective, (2) maintaining the same topic and objective for consecutive activities, (3) applying appropriate teaching methods and techniques, (4) selecting materials for listen-

ing comprehension activities, and (5) using authentic materials.

1. Motivating students to focus on the learning objective

When students clearly understand the purpose of a particular listening comprehension activity, they will be better able to focus on essential vocabulary and grammar and listen for specific information. This will help them to complete the learning objectives in a shorter amount of time. For example, if the teacher informs the students at the start of a lesson that the objective will be “understanding directions,” they can focus on listening for and remembering the vocabulary associated with giving directions. If students are unaware of the objective for a lesson, they may be able to complete a simple activity requiring a “Yes” or “No” answer, but they may not remember specific vocabulary used in giving directions or be able to reiterate specific phrases in more open-ended activities. As a result, students will be less likely to retain the specific learning objectives of the lesson.

2. Maintaining the same topic and objective for consecutive activities

Learning is more effective when different activities within a lesson maintain the same topic and learning objective, as opposed to a lesson being a series of unrelated activities with changing topics and objectives. When activities share the same topic and learning objective, students will reinforce their learning through repetition and continued association with a familiar topic. For example, if the topic is “celebrations,” and the objective is to understand speech that is spoken at a certain rate, teachers can maintain the same topic and objective throughout several activities in one lesson. The following example includes a warm-up activity, a listening comprehension activity, controlled practice, and an open-ended listening/speaking activity.

1. Start with a warm-up question to the class, such as: “What’s your favorite celebration?” or “What’s the favorite celebration in this class?”
2. Then, introduce a listening comprehension activity in which two people have a conversation about their favorite celebration, and have students answer True or False questions based on the conversation.
3. Next, conduct a controlled practice activity, which could be a drill activity that models vocabulary or an important grammatical structure.
4. Finally, introduce an open-ended activity that allows students the freedom to practice listening comprehension and speaking, such as interviewing other members in the class about their favorite celebration and asking for further information.

In the above example, each activity builds on the preceding one using the same objective throughout. The idea is that communication and listening comprehension should expand the students’ knowledge by maintaining a topic throughout consecutive activities and reinforcing the same learning objective.

3. Applying appropriate teaching methods and techniques

When designing listening comprehension lessons, teachers should apply the following methods and techniques to make the lessons

challenging, effective, and interesting to the students.

Use a variety of activities

If a teacher always uses the same activities, they will become boring for students. It is important to vary activities to stimulate the students’ interest and challenge them with something new. It is also important to consider activities that involve group work and problem solving and that instigate communication and listening comprehension development.

A variation of the simple “Fill in the Missing Word” listening activity is to use the same listening materials but to combine pair work with an information-gap activity. For example, give student A and student B worksheets containing the lyrics to the same song, but make sure that each student has different pieces of missing information. Without showing their worksheets to each other, the two students take turns asking questions about the missing information, and the answers supplied by their partner will complete the lyrics to the song. Using this technique, students have to practice effective communication by accurately forming the correct questions necessary to elicit the missing words from their partners. Finally, students can check their answers by listening to the song.

Another example for a lengthy listening activity is to assign students different comprehension questions about a listening text that tells a story or gives a report. Together, the answers to the questions will explain the story or report. After listening to a recording and taking notes to answer the questions, students then ask each other questions about what each class member heard until they get enough information to complete the big picture. The teacher can play the recording as many times as is needed, depending on the level of difficulty and the ability of the students. This way, the students try to find answers to the questions independently, rather than knowing that the teacher will give the answers straight away.

Use effective questioning techniques

The teacher can also use effective questioning techniques to further develop students’ listening comprehension and to test their understanding of a particular grammatical structure. For instance, in an example from Richards, Hull, and Proctor (1998), a con-

versation about childhood memories occurs between two individuals and one speaker, Jane, says, "I used to collect shells when I was a kid." Before listening to the conversation, the teacher introduces the focus question to help the students get the gist, or general understanding, before listening for specific answers. An example focus question could be: "What did Jane collect when she was a kid?"

Another possible question evaluates whether the students understand the function of the grammatical structure *used to*, such as: "Does Jane collect shells now?" The answer should be "No," to demonstrate the understanding of an activity that happened regularly in the past but does not occur anymore. If the students answer incorrectly, it indicates that they need a further explanation of the expression *used to* (Richards, Hull, and Proctor 1998).

To extend the listening activity, the teacher could arrange the class into groups and use open-ended questioning techniques to work further on the listening activity in a communicative context. This is done with questions about the students' childhood memories, thereby giving them the opportunity to use the grammatical form *used to* in a context that is directly related to their lives.

4. Selecting materials for listening comprehension activities

When selecting materials, the following criteria can be used to make listening comprehension activities both productive and engaging.

Make material relevant to students

When selecting listening comprehension materials, it is important to decide how relevant they are to the learner's life and long-term learning goals. One way to determine this is to conduct a needs assessment of the learners: identify the students' interests, language learning strengths and weaknesses, and the real-life situations they are likely to encounter. Then set appropriate learning objectives. This way, the content of the didactic material will be relevant and will appeal to the students. This approach will go a long way towards maintaining students' interest and motivation levels.

If materials are not selected carefully, student performance will suffer. For example, Japanese students would have little interest

in developing listening comprehension skills by listening to a radio commentary about the game of cricket. Apart from not understanding the vocabulary involved, they would not be motivated to understand something that they cannot relate to. Consequently, the true level of their listening comprehension skills would be misleading because wrong answers could signify a lack of interest or knowledge of specific vocabulary, rather than the actual level of their listening comprehension skills.

Regarding long-term learning goals, in Japan younger students may be more interested in developing their listening skills through music or general interest topics. In contrast, an EFL class consisting of students specializing in the hospitality industry might be more interested in being able to comprehend conversations in a hotel or restaurant setting, in understanding how to take orders correctly, or in answering customers' questions. Every student is different, and it is particularly important to identify the learning goals of each individual.

Focus on the clear design and layout of materials

The design and layout of the materials are another factor to consider when developing listening comprehension activities. Teachers should avoid including too many activities that may cause the learner to feel overwhelmed and unable to focus on each listening comprehension task. When designing listening comprehension materials, give clear instructions at the beginning of each activity and one or two examples of the expected response. This confirms the expected outcome by students and prevents feelings of confusion and frustration. If students misunderstand the expected response, they may give teachers the wrong impression of their listening comprehension ability.

Emphasize prediction in listening comprehension materials

Any activity worksheet used for listening comprehension should contain the correct schema to help students predict the type of language they will hear. One technique is to use pictures that relate to the topic or situation in a listening activity. This will provide the correct schema and aid students' comprehension ability. The presentation of a worksheet will either assist or detract from

students' ability to give correct indications of their actual listening-comprehension skill. To maximize students' learning ability, assist them by taking the time to design a worksheet that is user-friendly.

Select materials appropriate for students' level

When evaluating listening materials, carefully consider the level of difficulty and the language level of the students. The responses required should be appropriate for their level. For example, it would be unrealistic to use a listening activity in which beginning students listen to a conversation involving two friends discussing environmental problems and then expect the students to give their opinions on the environmental problems, based on the comments of the speakers in the listening activity.

It would be more appropriate to give beginning students a listening activity that requires them to give a short answer that confirms information given in the listening activity or which asks them to directly transfer what they have heard in a gap-fill activity. These activities are more appropriate to help beginning students develop their linguistic knowledge, thus avoiding the danger of overestimating their comprehension and language ability.

5. Using authentic materials

The use of authentic texts helps students to further develop their communicative skills (Porter and Roberts 1987; Brown 2001; Mangubhai 2002). When designing listening comprehension materials, the teacher should be aware that authentic materials give the learner the chance to develop skills that are needed in real-life situations.

With the use of authentic listening materials, students learn to comprehend challenging language elements such as a natural rate of delivery and intonation, false starts, slang, reduced forms, abbreviations, and other characteristics of spoken language. This exposure helps students comprehend real-life, everyday language, make allowances for performance errors by other speakers, deal with interrup-

tions, and so on. Some texts are limited in the amount of authentic listening activities they provide, especially for the lower levels. It is therefore important to take the opportunity, wherever possible, to help students become communicatively competent by exposing them to examples of how language is actually used.

The use of authentic materials is beneficial for learners because the skills that are developed transfer beyond the classroom. Some examples are listening to a telephone message to understand a cancelled appointment, to a newscast to learn about current events, or to songs to relax and learn about the English lyrics and popular bands.

Conclusion

The most important factor to bear in mind when designing lessons to develop listening comprehension skills is that students need to be motivated and to stay motivated. I hope that the principles outlined in this article help teachers design successful lessons that motivate their students to improve their listening skills and become more communicatively competent.

References

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