



## Learning Listening Skills in English Language

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### **Abstract:**

*Listening activity plays an important role in the process of learning and acquiring the first or the second language. Every obstacle in the listening activity affects the language development of the other skills. During the process of the first language acquisition, children, quite naturally, hear the language that is spoken around them. So, a year after birth, they begin to deal passively with the listening activity, while, over time, actively participate in the linguistic society where they belong to. However, during the process of learning a second language, listening is completely a voluntary activity. So during intentional learning, students are required to listen to the second language where linguistic connotations are taught to them step by step.*

*Thus, they are taught to listen to the linguistic elements such as phonemes, morphemes, lexical units, grammatical units, syntactic units and semantic units, in order to develop other language skills, such as speaking, reading and writing.*

*In this paper some of the key aspects of listening skills will be addressed such as: listening process, encoding and decoding process, the process of listening comprehension, the understanding of the speaker as opposed to the understanding of the listener, speaker-listener polarity; kinds of listening; the connection between speaking and listening; listening goal; listening sub skills and difficulty factors in listening.*

**Key words:** skill, listening, encoding and decoding process, polarity, listening sub skills.

## 1. Listening process

Listening is the first and the main linguistic skill that children acquire. It forms the basis of the other linguistic arts.<sup>1</sup>

Listening is extremely complex and multi steps process, through which the mind turns to understanding the spoken language.<sup>2</sup> Researchers have identified three steps in the listening process, such as: (1) reception; (2) processing and (3) the definition of the meaning.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, during the first step, the listeners receive listening stimulants or listening and visual incentives that come from the speaker. During the second step, listeners focus to make the selection of these incentives, by avoiding those who shift their attention. Since in class students are surrounded by many incentives, they should be attracted by the message of the speaker through the important information that it conveys.

During the third step, listeners define or grasp the meaning of the message of the speaker.

Meanwhile, Anderson and Pamela (1986) have identified three stages of listening process, such as: (1) perception; (2) elaboration and (3) utilization.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, during the perception phase, students focus on the sounds of the language and deposit them in memory.

During the elaboration phase, listeners use words and phrases to make meaningful reproductions. They acknowledge the formation of the words as meaningful units, which can be stored in memory. The volume of the part that listeners remember depends on several factors, including language skills, knowledge of the topic, as well as the quality of the signal.

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, M., Pamela, L. "English For Academic Listening: Teaching The Skills Associated With Listening To Extended Discourse" , *Foreign Language Annuals*, No. 19, 1986, pg. 391-398.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

Meanwhile, during the final phase, it means that of the utilization, listeners pierce the long-term memory to connect the unknown with the already known.

The stored information presented in the form of schemes. Therefore, they must rely on their personal knowledge.

## **2. Encoding and decoding process**

Communication act requires the encoder, it means, the speaker, and decoder, it means, the listener. Thus, the speaker encodes the concept through an encoding community. Meanwhile, the listener decodes the concept or message through the community of codes that the speaker uses. So, on the one hand, the act of encoding involves conversion of sounds into words, words into sentences, sentences into discourse, on the other hand, the act of decoding involves identifying sounds, grasping the expressions and their meanings, as well as recognizing prosodic features, such as tone, intonation, musicality of voice, accent, etc., that the speaker uses.

## **3. The process of listening comprehension**

It is noted that the process of listening comprehension is developed in two ways, it means, (1) from down-up; and (2) from up-down.<sup>5</sup> The process from down-up, has to do with the use of input as a source of information to understand the message, while the process from up-down, has to do with using the knowledge to grasp the meaning of the message.

## **4. The understanding of the speaker as opposed to the understanding of the listener**

It is already known that the speaker is the giver of the meaning, and the listener is the recipient. So, the speaker

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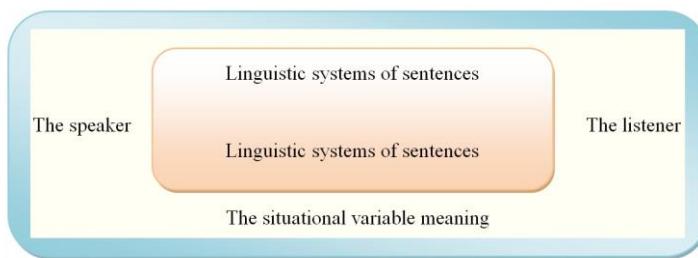
<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

conveys the meaning, and the listener absorbs the meaning at the time of its delivery from the speaker.

However, in certain contexts, the listener fails to understand the speaker's expressions, as the focus is on the first and direct meanings instead of contextual meaning. In this case, the meaning given by the speaker changes from the meaning received by the listener.

During the development of the conversational discourse, simultaneous cooperation of the speaker and the listener for delivering and receiving the meaning is very important. If the speaker deviates from the context, then the responsibility of the listener is less than the speaker's. Thus, there are two types of meaning:<sup>6</sup> one is (1) the linguistic invariable meaning, while the other is (2) the situational variable meaning.

**Diagram** <sup>7</sup>



Then, in a particular context, the linguistic element conveys to the listener just one meaning, it means the linguistic invariable meaning. In another context, the listener gets a different meaning for the same linguistic element used in the appropriate context, it means, in the contextual meaning.

## 5. Speaker-listener polarity

Performing communication depends heavily on two polarities, it means, the speaker and the listener. These two polarities are basic communication requirements. In fact, communication is a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

confrontation between two individuals to share information or to achieve a particular purpose.

That the exchange of information to be effective, both the speaker and the listener must necessarily be equipped with the used language competence. So, the speaker and the listener should have an equal level of linguistic competence. Thus, any deficiency in the linguistic competence of the speaker or the listener would affect the progress of communication. Thus, both of these polarities must be more or less equipped with linguistic competence, so that communication is accurate and efficient.

## 6. Kinds of listening

Researchers have identified eight kinds of listening with relevant general purposes:<sup>8</sup>

- ⇒ *Transactional listening: learning new information (for example, speeches, debates, political assemblies);*
- ⇒ *Interactive listening: recognition of the personal component of the message (for example, unknown speeches, reports);*
- ⇒ *Critical listening: evaluation of reasoning and evidence (for example, the news on the radio);*
- ⇒ *Entertaining listening: evaluation of the casual and integrated aspects of an event (for example, fiction books);*
- ⇒ *Evaluative listening: information, choice or critical separation (for example, scientific texts);*
- ⇒ *Selective listening: selection of certain features (for example, phonetic features);*
- ⇒ *Intensive listening: grasp of the details (for example, vocabulary, grammar);*
- ⇒ *Extensive listening: grasp of the general idea (for example, stories, rhymed poems, songs).*

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, G. "Investigation Listening Comprehension In Context", *Applied Linguistics*, No. 7, 1986, pg. 284-302.

⇒ *A description of some of these kinds of listening is given below.*

### **6.1. Evaluative listening**

Our satisfaction can be increased by listening radio and television programs. Listening to them helps us to reduce tension of everyday life, as well as to expand the range of experiences and pleasures. Meanwhile, attentive listening gives us the opportunity to improve the language use.

### **6.2. Informative listening**

Speeches of candidates in election campaigns, political debates and works in political assemblies etc., that are followed particularly through television, carry information on developments inside and outside the country.

With the help of informative listening, we can find solutions to problems, we can get instructions, we can get informed about the news of current interest, and we can learn the opinions of others.

Informative listening always gives us opportunities to develop our conversation, as well as examples to enrich ideas, to perfect speeches, to improve the preparation of papers and other types of written works.

### **6.3. Critical listening**

Critical listener should be very objective. He/she should not be affected by emotions or other subjective feelings. He/she must judge based on information and evidence.

Critical listening involves distinguishing facts from opinions, investigation of prejudice and one-sidedness, smell of the speaker's research goal.

The term "critical listening" always means having a suspicious attitude, analysis and judgment of spoken materials like in the case of "critical reading" of written materials.

#### **6.4. Selective listening**

Selective listening technique stands mainly at listening of only some specific features in the same unit time. The individual must listen to grasp a feature or a set of features at a time. Then, he should listen to all the features of the language. Selective listening should be systematic. Selective listening features are:

- ⇒ *Phonetic feature (only vowels are used);*
- ⇒ *Vocabulary;*
- ⇒ *Grammar (morphology and syntax).*

#### **6.5. Extensive listening**

Stories, poems, songs, television advertisements, poetries, fairy tales and legends can be used for extensive listening. Through extensive listening, many opportunities are given to develop and exercise the listening skill in natural ways. The listener follows the meaning simply because he is interested to get information or to satisfy himself/herself.

#### **6.6. Intensive listening**

To provide listeners, it means, students, with the ability of grasping the essence of the meaning, and to recognize the special features of language, such as vocabulary, grammar and spelling, teachers should train them in the field of intensive listening.

### **7. The connection between speaking and listening**

Speaking and listening are interdependent processes. Thus, the listening activity requires the presence of a listener, an individual or an audience.

The speaker speaks by keeping in mind certain objectives. So discourse, it means, speaking involves conveying the meaning by using a given code, while listening involves grasping the meaning through the code used by the speaker.

When dealing with transaction, that is, one side listening, the speaker does not react to the listener, but when it comes to interaction, the speaker always reacts to the listener. In transactional or conversational discourse, given-taken and taken-given phenomena are alternative. Meanwhile, the relationship between discourses, it means, speaking, and listening is presented in the following chart:

### Verbal communication

Discourse or speaking	One side transaction →→→→→→→→→→	Listening
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓		↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑
Discourse or speaking	Two sides transaction →→→→→→→→→→	Listening
Listening	←←←←←←←←←←←←←←	Discourse or speaking

## 8. Listening goal

Every individual or group activity has a goal. Without a goal, there can be no activity in the linguistic society. Researchers have described these five listening goals:<sup>9</sup>

- ⇒ *Discriminatory listening;*
- ⇒ *Aesthetic listening;*
- ⇒ *Centrifugal listening;*
- ⇒ *Critical listening;*
- ⇒ *Therapeutic listening.*

### 8.1. Discriminatory listening

People listen to identify sounds, and to develop the sensitivity of nonverbal communication. Thus, learning discriminatory listening involves learning different sounds of animals, common noises etc., registered on tape, which can be listened every day.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, G., *Speakers, Listeners And Communication*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pg. 101.

## **8.2. Aesthetic listening**

Aesthetic listening is to enjoy listening to a speaker or a reader. Thus, listening to someone reading stories aloud or reciting poetry is an activity that brings only pleasure.

## **8.3. Centrifugal listening**

People exercise centrifugal listening to understand a particular message and this is the kind of reading that is required in many educational activities, especially in the case of thematic cycles. Students determine the intention of the speaker, and then organize the information in order to remember it. Thus, taking notes is one of the typical strategies in the case of centrifugal listening, which is taught in all classes of secondary schools.

## **8.4. Critical listening**

People listen to get information and then deal with the evaluation of the message. Thus, critical listening is the extension of centrifugal listening. As in the centrifugal reading, listeners here want to investigate the means of propaganda and persuasive language. Critical listening is used when people listen to the debates, advertisements, political speeches and other arguments.

## **8.5. Therapeutic listening**

People listen to allow the speaker to finish the elaboration of the problem. Children, like adults, serve as systematic listeners of friends and their families. Although it is important, this type of listening is less suitable for students.

## **9. Listening sub skills**

Each linguistic skill includes a large number of sub skills, whose value varies from one situation to another. Researchers have distinguished two kinds of listening sub skills:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

- ⇒ "Potential skills" that is, the skills that are used to perceive what the speaker says and interpret their meaning and purpose;
- ⇒ "Stimulating skills" that is, the skills that are used to react properly against the message.

### **9.1. Potential skills**

- a. Perception

Recognition of the importance within expressions, including:

- ⇒ Distinguishing sounds of words, especially phonemic contrasts;
- ⇒ Distinguishing strong and weak forms, phonetic changes in the limits of words;
- ⇒ Identification of stress and voice fluctuations (information units, the stress, etc.).

- b. Interpretation

Formulation of the meaning of the expressions content, including:

- ⇒ Extracting the meaning of unknown words;
- ⇒ Revealing implicit information;
- ⇒ Revealing the connections between prepositions

Formulation of the conceptual framework, that connects expressions, including:

- ⇒ Recognition of discourse points (clarity, opposition);
- ⇒ Construction of the topic within the extension of discourse;
- ⇒ Anticipation of content;
- ⇒ Identification of the elements that help to form an overall scheme;
- ⇒ Protection and update of the context.

(Possible) interpretation of the speaker's purpose, including:

- ⇒ Identification of the framework speaker-listener;

- ⇒ *Protection of loadings in prosody and establishing of logical connection;*
- ⇒ *Notice of contradictions, inaccurate information and ambiguities;*
- ⇒ *Distinguishing fact from opinion.*

## **9.2. Stimulating skills**

Appropriate reaction (according to above actions), including:

- ⇒ *Selection of the main points for the current task;*
- ⇒ *Decoding of the information in the written form (for example, notes);*
- ⇒ *Identification of issues that need to be clarified;*
- ⇒ *Integration of information with other sources;*
- ⇒ *Proper equipment of the speaker with reactive impetus.<sup>11</sup>*

## **10. Difficulty factors in listening**

Over the years, scientific research has tried to define the factors that hinder or facilitate the understanding of a particular passage. Among the most prominent works in this field are those of Brown and Rubin.<sup>12</sup> The latter has identified these characteristics that affect listening:<sup>13</sup>

- ⇒ *Text characteristics;*
- ⇒ *Interlocutor characteristics;*
- ⇒ *Task characteristics;*
- ⇒ *Listener characteristics;*
- ⇒ *Process characteristics.*

Through illustration, we give below a summary description that Brown has made for the first characteristics, it means, those that are related to the text itself. It has been indicated that the text is easy to be heard:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

- ⇒ When there are few speakers and objects;
- ⇒ When speakers and objects are distinct and different from each other;
- ⇒ When the order of storytelling matches the order of its occurrence;
- ⇒ When necessary interferences are the ones that should have been foreseen;
- ⇒ When the text context matches with what the listener already knows (use of existing schemes).

## 11. Conclusion

Listening is the main cause that leads to the development of other language skills. Thus, every deficiency in listening affects the final development of other skills. Then, to avoid the defects and weaknesses in listening, it is believed that the following recommendations will help the students and teachers of a second language:

- Learning listening comprehension should not be underestimated, nor should be left aside. It is believed that it can be taught to children through understanding the context, extracting the meaning of unknown words and grasping contextual and situational meaning of words.
- It is considered that the dialogues recorded on tape may be given to students to be listened regularly. Then, they should be asked about their semantic content. This kind of practice would help students to increase the capacity of understanding and communicative competence.
- In our opinion, the development of games in class for the distinction of sounds, recognition of minimal pair, recognition of morphemes, recognition of words syllables, recognition the silent letters of words, recognition of parts of speech etc., would help in terms of increasing the ability of listeners, it means, students, to

distinguish phonemes, morphemes and phonetic variants of sounds.

- It is believed that students can be given the opportunity to hear different words, allowing them to write their synonyms and antonyms. Moreover, the practice of finding equal words of the first language for those of the second language, as well as the translation of the sentences from the second language to the first language, and vice versa, would help to develop language competence of students.
- It is believed that watching television programs, films, and listening to radio programs would certainly help to get familiar with the way English is used by native and foreign speakers. This type of exercise would also help them to understand dialectal variants of the second language.
- Meanwhile, it is believed that recognition of all kinds of announcements would help students to strengthen sociolinguistic knowledge and to increase their focus of attention.

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