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**Listening comprehension** **in English language teaching**

A course-paper

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Summary

Процес історичного розвитку методів вивчення іноземної мови зумовив зростання ролі усного мовлення як невід’ємного компоненту програми вивчення англійської мови. Сприймаючи усний матеріал, учні підсвідомо засвоюють граматичні структури мови, збагачують словниковий запас, звертають увагу на особливості фонетичної системи мови. Усне мовлення надає можливість взаємодії учасників навчального процесу, внаслідок якої вони впливають один на одного.

Різноманітні вправи з відповідним матеріалом забезпечують прогресивний розвиток слухових здібностей і навиків їх використання у мовних ситуаціях. Вдало підібраний усний матеріал на аудіо і відеокасетах, а також безпосереднє спілкування з носіями англійської мови сприяють підвищенню рівня знань учнів та їх комунікативних можливостей. Наявність матеріалу, що включає різні зразки розмовної мови, сприяє вивченню різновидів англійської мови, а також способів викладу певної інформації.

# Introduction

Foreign languages have been taught formally for centuriesand records of language teaching materials have been around for over 500 years [8,p.139]. However, teaching listening comprehension as a part of teaching a foreign or second language is a relatively recent development whose history lies mostly in the last thirty years. In the earliest of teaching methods known, the grammar-translation method, learners focused exclusively on the analysis of written texts. Listening was used solely to accompany these texts and to provide models for oral reading. It was not until the late 1800s that listening was used in language instruction as a means of developing oral communication [8,p.139]. It was assumed that students would simply acquire the ability to understand the spoken form of the language if they occasionally heard their teacher speak it or listened to a tape of it being spoken. It was quickly demonstrated that this approach was simply not working.

This led to the development of the *direct method* in which oral presentations and aural comprehension were emphasized. The target language was exclusively used in the classroom and translation was proscribed. Second language learning was intended to proceed largely as first languages were learned - moving from tangible situations to more abstract ones. Initially, only everyday, concrete vocabulary and sentences were taught. Oral communication was initiated by the teacher through question-answer exchanges with the learners. All new language was taught through demonstrations, objects and pictures, much the way that a child is immersed in visual contexts and oral language.

The direct method, which was initially designed for small group teaching, was eventually adapted for use with larger groups and for teaching the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing). This new style of teaching, which emanated from England, was later dubbed the *oral approach* because all lessons started with oral presentations [8,p.140]. Dialogues in which new grammar patterns and vocabulary were introduced were modelled by the teacher. The learners repeated chorally, trying to imitate the teacher’s pronunciation. Oral drills, based on the dialogues, were devised to reinforce these new language points, initially through a listening mode. Eventually, learners were given reading and writing assignments using the structures and words they had practiced.

At about the same time that the oral approach was being developed in Europe, American linguists began to propagate a somewhat more extreme approach called the *audio-lingual method* [8,p.140]. In this approach also, the emphasis was on oral presentation and oral drills. The purpose of this method was to retain learners to think in the new language by helping them to form new habits, a view that was obviously driven by the behavioural psychology that was popular at the time.

Although these oral-aural methods helped many pupils learn second languages, there has been a gradual decline in their popularity. Starting in the 1970s, there was a worldwide rethinking of the principles involved in second language teaching. The result of this came to be known as *communicative language* *teaching*, a movement that emphasized not just the importance of oral language in language acquisition, but the use of realistic and authentic social language [8,p.140]. The communicative language teaching movement gave rise to the use of audio and later video material which reflected authentic language in use. Learners were no longer exposed to ideal grammar and vocabulary samples of oral language. Instead, they were given a steady exposure to situational dialogues and language fictions.

Simultaneous to the development of communicative language teaching, the study of second language acquisition became an accepted and increasingly respected discipline within linguistics and social science [1; 2; 8;].

# I. The principles of teaching listening comprehension

# 1. Reasons for teaching listening comprehension

One of the main reasons for getting students to listen to spoken English is to let them hear different varieties and accents - rather then just the voice of their teacher with its own idiosyncrasies. In today’s world, they need to be exposed not only to one variety of English (British English, for example) but also to varieties such as American English, Australian English, Caribbean English, Indian English or West African English.

There are, of course, problems associated with the issue of language variety. Within British English, for example, there are many different dialects and accents. The differences are not only in the pronunciation of sounds (‘*bath*’ like ‘*laugh*’ vs. ‘*bath*’ like ‘*cat*’) but also in grammar (the use of ‘shall’ in northern varieties compared with its use in ‘Standard English’ - the southern, BBC-type variety). The same is of course true American, Indian or West African English.

Despite the desirability of exposing students to many varieties of English, however, common sense is called for. The number of different varieties (and the degree to which they are different from the one students are learning) will be a matter for the teacher to judge. But even if they only hear occasional varieties of English, which are different from the teacher’s, it will give them a better idea of the world language, which English has become.

The second major reason for teaching listening is because it helps students to acquire language subconsciously even if teachers do not draw attention to its special features. Exposure to language is a fundamental requirement for anyone wanting to learn it. Listening to appropriate tapes provides such exposure and students get vital information not only about grammar and vocabulary but also about pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, pitch and stress.

Lastly, students get better at listening the more they do it. Listening is a skill and any help we can give students in performing that skill will help them to be better listeners [5,p.97-98].

### 

# 2. What is listening?

In order to define listening, we must outline the main component skills in listening. In terms of the necessary components, we can list the following:

* discrimination between sounds
* recognizing words
* identifying grammatical groupings of words
* identifying ‘pragmatic units’ - expressions and sets of utterance which function as whole units to create meaning
* connecting linguistic cues to paralinguistic cues (intonation and stress) and to nonlinguistic cues (gestures and relevant objects in the situation) in order to construct meaning
* using background knowledge (what we already know about the content and the form) and context (what has already been said) to predict and then to confirm meaning
* recalling important words and ideas

Successful listening involves an integration of these component skills. In this sense, listening is a coordination of the component skills, not the individual skills themselves. This integration of these perception skills, analysis skills, and synthesis skills is what we call a person’s *listening ability* [9,p.4].

Even though a person may have good listening ability, he or she may not always be able to understand what is being said. In order to understand messages, some conscious action is necessary to use this ability effectively, so it is not possible to view it directly, but we can see the effects of this action. The underlying action for successful listening is *decision making* [9,p.4]. The listener must make these kinds of decisions:

* What kind of situation is this?
* What is my plan for listening?
* What are the important words and units of meaning?
* Does the message make sense?

Successful listening requires making effective ‘real time’ decisions about these questions. In this sense, listening is primarily a thinking process - *thinking about meaning*. Effective listeners develop a useful way of thinking about meaning as they listen. The way in which listener makes these decisions is what we will call a *listening strategy* [9,p.4].

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# 3. Principles for developing listening ability

Using general knowledge about language skill development, we can draw up some guidelines for developing listening ability:

1. *Listening ability develops through face-to-face interaction.*

By *interacting* in English, learners have the chance for new language input and the chance to check their own listening ability. Face-to-face interaction provides stimulation for development of listening for meaning.

1. *Listening develops through focusing on meaning and trying to learn new and important content in the target language.*

By focusing on meaning and *real reasons* *for listening* in English, learners can mobile both their linguistic and non-linguistic abilities to understand.

1. *Listening ability develops through work on comprehension activities.*

By focusing on *specific goals* for listening, learners can evaluate their efforts and abilities. By having well-defined comprehension activities, learners have opportunities for assessing what they have achieved and for revision.

1. *Listening develops through attention to accuracy and an analysis of form.*

By learning to perceive sounds and words *accurately* as they work on meaning-oriented activities, our learners can make steady progress. By learning to hear sounds and words more accurately, learners gain confidence in listening for meaning [9,p.7].

### 

# 4. The purpose and nature of the listening comprehension programme

The following main goals are suggested for the listening comprehension programme:

* 1. *to give the learners experience of listening to a wide variety of samples of spoken language*. The purpose here, then, is *exposure* to:
* different varieties of language (standard/regional, formal/informal etc.);
* different text types (conversational, narrative, informative etc.).

The motivation for the learner should be pleasure, interest, and a growing confidence at being able to understand the spoken language without reference to the written form.

* 1. *to train the learners to listen flexibly* e. g. for specific information, for the main idea or ideas, or to react to instructions (i. e. by doing something). The motivation for this type of listening will come from tasks, which are interesting in their own right, and which will focus the learners’ attention on the material in an appropriate way.
  2. *to provide, through listening, a stimulus for other activities* e. g. discussion, reading and writing.
  3. *to give the learners opportunities to interact while listening*. In the classroom this must be done largely through discussion-type activities and games, where listening forms a natural part of the activity. This type of activity will be done mostly in small groups, but there are occasions when the teacher can profitably interact with the whole class [1,p.15].

# II. The structure of listening comprehension and types of activities

# 1.Organisation of listening comprehension

Listening comprehension is divided into four main sections:

Section I. ***Attentive listening***

Section II. ***Intensive listening***

Section III. ***Selective listening***

Section IV. ***Interactive listening***

Each section helps students develop a range of skills and strategies.

Section I: *Attentive listening* is designed to give students practice with listening and with supplying short responses to the speaker, either verbally or non-verbally (through actions). Because this kind of ‘responsive’ listening involves immediate processing of information and quick decisions about how to respond, the activities in Section I provide a great deal of support to help the learners ‘process’ the information they hear. The support is of three types: *linguistic*, in the form of cue words and previewed utterances, *non-linguistic*, in the form of visual aids, photographs, tangible objects and music used in the activity, and *interactional*, in the form of repetitions, paraphrases and confirmation checks by the speaker. By providing this support, the activities allow the teacher to introduce real-time listening practice to students at all levels, including beginners. Because the support in each activity can be varied, teachers can utilise these activities with more proficient students as well, to help them increase their attention span for spoken English.

Section II: *Intensive listening* will focus the students’ attention on language form. The aim of this section is to raise the learners’ awareness of how differences in sound, structure, and lexical choice can affect meaning. Because this kind of listening involves an appreciation of how form affects meaning, all of the activities in this section are contextualised - placed in a real or easily imagined situation [9,p.10]. In this way, all students - even beginners - can practise intensive listening in a context of language use, from which it is most likely to transfer to ‘real life’ listening situation. Because the activities in this section require attention to specific *contrasts* of form - grammatical, lexical, or phonological - the teacher can easily adapt the activities to more proficient students by increasing the complexity of the language forms.

Section III: *Selective listening* will help enable students to identify a purpose for listening. By providing focused information-based tasks, the activities in Section III help direct the students’ attention on key words, discourse sequence cues, or ‘information structures’ (exchanges in which factual information is given). By learning to attend to words, cues, and facts *selectively*, students at all levels come to handle short naturalistic text (such as announcements) as well as longer and more complex texts (such as authentic video programmes). Because the task support in these activities can b adjusted, Section III is useful for students at all proficiency levels.

Section IV: *Interactive listening* is designed to help learners assume active roles in shaping and controlling an interaction, even when they are in the ‘listener’s role’. Because it is important for learners to take an active role as listeners, each activity in this section has a built-in need for information or classification questions by the listener. In order to work toward the goal of active participation by the listener, the students themselves - rather than the teacher or an audio or video tape - become the focus of the activity. To this end, in Section IV, listening skills are developed in the context of interaction - mainly through information gap pair work, jigsaw groups, and student presentations and reports [9,p.10].

### 

# 2. Activities and procedures

***1. ‘Exposure’ listening***

The material for this will consist mainly of:

* + 1. *Stories, anecdotes, jokes, talks, commentaries* (i. e. with one speaker only)

Most learners need practice in listening to material with a single speaker only, so that they do not have the added difficulty of trying to identify the speakers when they cannot see them. The material may be recorded or improvised by the teacher.

* + 1. *Conversations, discussions, plays* (i. e. with more than one speaker)

The students will need to be given some background e. g. about the speakers. For plays they may actually need to follow the written text.

* + 1. *Songs (both traditional and pop)*

These provide a good form of listening because the students are generally very much concerned to make out the words [12,p.28].

* + 1. *Videos* *and* *films*

Clearly there is great advantage in using wherever possible recorded material where the students can see what is happening (even if it is only two people talking) as well as listen [1,p.16].

***2. Task listening***

The number of possible activities here is virtually limitless, although it is intended that the list below cover key areas.

1. *Ear-training*

In distinguishing between key sounds, stress and intonation patterns. Most learners need, enjoy and will benefit from activities, which will help to improve their receptive ability in these areas, especially if they are presented in a game-like way.

1. *Game-like* *activities*

‘Simon says” and variations on the game of ‘Bingo’ are effective ways of getting learners to respond to instructions, listen out for specific items and so on. Many language games depend for their success on students listening [1,p.17].

1. *Instructions*

Activities such as picture dictation, where the students have to draw a picture which the teacher (or another student) talks about without showing them; completing a map or picture; following a route on the map in order to arrive at a particular place; arranging objects (e. g. pictures on an outline scene), involve careful listening without requiring a verbal response (unless the listeners ask for clarification).

1. *Completion-type activities*

For these the students have an incomplete version of a story, a description or a song (words, phrases or sentences omitted) which they have to complete either while they listen or afterwards.

1. *Identifying* *mistakes or contradictions*

For example an object (thing, person or place - either real or in pictorial form) is described and the students have to listen and note down any mistakes. Similarly a text (a story or description) containing internal contradictions can be used for the same purpose.

1. *Finding differences*

The students hear, for example, two versions of a story or two accounts of an event and have to identify the points of difference.

1. *Problem-solving*

For example, the students are shown pictures of 3-4 people, places, events and listen to one of these being described. Their task is to decide which item is being talked about. Students may also be asked to categorise on a worksheet items mentioned in a conversation or discussion.

1. *Extracting information*

This is one of the commonest types of listening tasks. For this the students will probably need a chart of some kind, which they have to fill in according to specific instructions. For example, if they are listening to a broadcast they may be asked to note down the main topics or, on an easier level, decide in what order they occur in the talk.

For tasks, which involve extracting information, it is often desirable to define the role of the listener so that he has a clear purpose for carrying out the task [1,p.17].

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# 3. Listening as a stimulus to other activities

The activities in this section are specially designed to lead on to activities involving other skills.

* + 1. *Jigsaw listening*

As its name implies, the basic mechanism underlying this activity is that the information needed to complete a task (such as attending a meeting) has been shared out between 3-4 groups in the class. Each group listens to its own piece of recorded material and notes down on a worksheet the information available. The groups then combine to pool their information.

* + 1. *Ambiguous conversations*

The students hear a short conversation (or an extract from a long conversation), which provides very few clues as to what the speakers are talking about. The students themselves have to decide who the speakers are, where they are, what they are talking about, and, possibly, what will happen next. This type of listening then, leads on naturally to discussion (and, if desired, writing).

* + 1. *Decision-making*

The students are given some information e. g. about a town (places of interest, facilities etc.) in the form of a talk or conversation, on the basis of which they have to plan a visit. The planning involves discussion and note making. Decision-making activities can also involve, for example, making choices between places, events, activities, for which the background information is made available in recorded form.

* + 1. *Pre-reading activity*

The students hear, for example, a conversation about the Loch Ness Monster, as a stimulus to listen to an article or book on the subject. Similarly they can be asked to listen to short reports on books before deciding which one they want to read.

* + 1. *Pre-writing activity*

This can be in the form of a communication game. One student describes a picture, which the others in the group are not allowed to see. The students who are listening make notes (and can also ask questions if they want more information). They then use these notes to write a description of the picture [1,p.18]

# 4. Interactive listening

Most interactive listening situations are in the form of discussions and games. Two important points need to be kept in mind.

First, these activities form the basis of oral work, where the emphasis is on getting the learners to use language for self-expression. It should not be forgotten, however, that listening is an important aspect of these activities. The learners have to listen in order to participate.

Secondly, although these activities are normally done in groups, in order to give the students themselves as many opportunities as possible to use language, we should also look for suitable opportunities to interact with the class as a whole, through conversation, discussion and games. This must be regarded as a significant component of the listening comprehension programme.

1. *Discussion-type activities*

These provide good listening practice because they get students to listen to one another, especially if the discussion is geared toward making a decision of some kind. For such activities the student have to listen to one another in order to participate.

1. *Predictive listening*

For this activity a text is read aloud sentence-by-sentence. The students are asked to interpret the sentence and to predict what they think will follow. As the text builds up, they can revise their interpretations. Although this is a contrived activity, it encourages very careful listening both to the text itself and to the various interpretations suggested.

1. *Communication games*

Many communication games provide excellent practice. For example, *Describe and draw* where the listeners, whose task is to draw the picture being described, interact with the speaker in order to elicit more information.com*plete it* is based on the jigsaw principle. In this case, however, the information is divided up visually among the participants, who have to talk and ask questions in order to build up the complete story. Games, which involve the evaluation of a player’s performance, such as, *Use it*, also provide purposeful listening practice [8,p.28].

1. *Interviews*

The students can be asked to design questionnaires or surveys, which they use to interview one another or people outside the classroom. Interviewing of this kind involves careful listening and recording of answers [1,p. 19].

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# 5. Listening material

The usage of the authentic listening material is one of the problems in the teaching listening comprehension. The important point, as always, is to meet the needs of the learners. On the short-term basis the learners need to listen to material, which allows them to feel comfortable, perhaps because it is mainly recycling known language. In addition to this, particularly taking their long-term needs into account, the learners have to be exposed to listening material, which is beyond their productive level. Whether this is ‘authentic’ in the early stages is not entirely relevant provided the material gets them used to *not understanding* every word; encourages them to *guess* - and, over and above this, stimulates them to talk (or read or write, if these are following-up activities). But, of course, whenever possible, some authentic material should be used, and on an increasing scale as the course progresses. However, it must be kept in mind that the use of authentic material for listening is very different from reading, where, because the learners can work individually and at their own pace, authentic material carries fewer risks. In the typical listening situation, care has to be taken to see that learners are not discouraged by excessive difficulties. In general, authentic materials are best used where the learners themselves are likely to appreciate them and accept them in spite of difficulties [1,p. 20].

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# 6. Listening comprehension tests

An effective way of developing the listening skill is through the provision of carefully selected practice material. Such material is in many ways similar to that used for testing listening comprehension. Although the auditory skills are closely linked to the oral skills in normal speech situations, it may sometimes be useful to separate the two skills for teaching and testing, since it is possible to develop listening ability much beyond the range of speaking and writing ability if the practice material is not dependent on spoken responses and written exercises.

An awareness of the way in which the spoken language differs from the written language is of crucial importance in the testing of the listening skills. For example, the spoken language is much more complex than the written language in certain ways, as a result of the large element of ‘redundancy’ that it contains [4, p.64]. Such features of redundancy make it possible for mutilated messages to be understood. Furthermore, the human brain has a limited capacity for the reception of information and it would often be impossible to absorb information at the speed at which it is conveyed through ordinary speech. Such conversational features as repetition, hesitation and grammatical re-patterning are all examples of this type of redundancy.

What is the significance of these features for testing purposes? Firstly, the ability to distinguish between phonemes, however important, does not in itself imply an ability to understand verbal messages. Moreover, occasional confusion over selected pairs of phonemes does not matter too greatly because in real-life situations listeners are able to use contextual clues to interpret what they hear.

Secondly, impromptu speech is usually easier to understand than carefully prepared (written) material when the latter is read aloud. Written tests generally omit many of the features of redundancy and impart information at a much higher rate than normal speech does. Consequently, it is essential to make provision for restating important points, rewriting and rephrasing them when writing material for aural tests [4,p.64-65].

# Conclusions

We have outlined the main reasons for teaching listening comprehension in a foreign language. It is now widely accepted that oral communication plays a vital role in second language teaching for it provides an exposure to language which is a fundamental requirement for the learner. Progress in listening guarantees a basis for development of other language skills. Spoken language provides a means of interaction where participation is a significant component of the listening programme.

We have provided a methodological organization of the listening comprehension process and we have discussed the principles of developing receptive skills of the learner. All subtypes of listening provide a natural progression from activities that entail minimal verbal interaction to those that involve a maximum of interaction. The goal of any activity is to provide the optimal challenge for the students. Since learners’ listening abilities vary, teachers should note how the activities could be adapted to the learners’ capabilities.

In showing a considerable variety of listening activities we have explored some of the many ways to help students acquire the confidence to use their skills for self-expression in language situations. Different activities and procedures provide the development of the listening for communicative tasks and for extracting general or certain specific points in the discourse.

We have discussed the use of authentic listening material and stressed the need for authentic-like texts at different levels. The teachers and students may encounter some difficulties not only in the reliability of the listening material, but also in the quality of English language media (TV and radio broadcasts, audio and videotapes, records) with the help of which listening material is presented. The important point is to satisfy the learners’ requirements and to involve their abilities to understand and reproduce the given material.

We have stressed the importance of careful selection of practice material for testing listening skills of the learners. It is necessary to construct different types of practical exercises for students to experience language. Listening comprehension tests present an effective method for developing listening abilities.

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