FACTORS AFFECTING LISTENING COMPREHENSION AND STRATEGIES FOR LISTENING CLASS

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Abstract
As one of the fundamental language skills, listening is a medium through which listeners gain a large portion of their information. Especially in this day of mass communication, it is of vital importance that our students are taught to listen effectively and critically. So the past years has seen a steady increase in the interest in studying listening comprehension.

We can read considerable articles on listening skills and some related listening teaching strategies. In this article, some factors which influence listening comprehension were analyzed and some teaching suggestions were put forward to make the listening classes more effective.

Key words: decoding, listening, teaching, listening comprehension, strategies

I. Introduction

Listening comprehension, a complicated decoding process, involves a number of basic processes some depending upon linguistic competence some depending upon previous knowledge that is not necessarily of a purely linguistic nature and some depending upon psychological variables that affect the mobilization of these competences and knowledge. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary and grasping his meaning. Howatt and Dakin. In order to decode message input exactly and accurately, the listeners must have storage of certain amount of codes: correct pronunciation, exact meaning and correct usages of certain amount of vocabulary.

II. Factors affecting listening comprehension

1. Incorrect and insufficient codes

In China, because of the traditional teaching style which stressed the ability to deal with every kind examinations, both teachers and students have paid much attention to the ability of reading comprehension and doing a lot of written exercises while ignoring the students' ability of listening and speaking. As a result, most students only pay attention to the spelling and superficial meaning of most words and they don't grasp the exact pronunciations of words. Their poor linguistic competence does not enable them presumably to recognize the formatives of the heard utterance to dissect out of the wave from of the morphemes, words and other meaning-bearing elements of the utterance.

2. Lacking necessary listening skills

Lacking necessary listening skills is the second critical factor affecting the students' listening comprehension. Because of the ignorance of the importance of listening teaching, the students have less listening practice for their foreign language learning and the teaching purposes of listening class and most listening material which is selected
in the class focus on checking the students’ ability instead of teaching necessary listening skills. So the teaching models of most listening class confine to “listening and checking answers.”

I. Inappropriate listening material

In listening class teachers tend to choose passages record news of broadcasts or prepare lectures. All of them have value, but they are extremely difficult sources for early practice in selective listening. This type of listening exercises does not present the redundancies the colloquialisms the hesitations the gestures and the facial expressions that are an inseparable part of the spoken language. They emphasize informational content and fail to provide the signals used to communicate information and meaning.

III. Strategies for listening classes

Taking the above factors into consideration, we can divide the listening class process into three stages.

1. Pre-listening: purpose must be given at this stage.
2. During listening: while listening
3. Post-listening: speaking

Pre-listening Setting the Stage

Effective listening requires that students be prepared for what they are about to hear so that they can remove the obstacles at the literal level. Pre-listening activities encourage students to listen at the interpretive and critical levels. Some jobs that have to be done and purposes for pre-listening are listed below.

1. Set proper purposes for listening

When proper and clear purposes for listening are designed for the students, they will know what they will pay attention to and they will become active listeners who listen for some certain things. This enhances their comprehension and retention.

2. Correct some wrong pronunciations of some words and remove linguistic obstacles.

It is important for students to get rid of some wrong pronunciations. Through students’ discussion, the teachers can find their bad pronunciations, which are obstacles for their listening comprehension and correct them.

3. Ignite interest by discussing and enrich some background knowledge and motivate students to attend to the spoken material.

4. Topics or some reading material related to the listening material should be design by the teachers for the students to discuss or read. Activities that prepare students for reading are often equally helpful in preparing them for listening. When students are able to relate the material they will listen to their own experience, they are more willing to listen actively. Using pre-listening activities, teachers can create an environment conducive to listening and encourage effective listening by remove obstacles of listening. Through involvement in pre-listening activities, students can develop an interest in the speaker’s topic and become willing active listeners.

IV. During Listening: Supporting and Managing the Listening Process

1. Creating separate instructional listening situations may be useful occasionally. However, it is more effective when listening instruction permeates the school day. Isolated listening instruction is artificial and does not foster transfer to students’ real life. To practice listening in meaningful contexts, students require opportunities to engage in open dialogue with peers in such informal situations as writing conferences and literature circles. They also need practice in more formal situations such as listening to student prepared speeches and guest speakers. In listening class, some jobs have to be done by the teacher.

1. Choose appropriate listening material

The teacher should try to select those teaching material which can be used in the way as follows:

First, the teacher can use brief mini-lessons to instruct students about effective listening practices and behaviors for a variety of situations and purposes. Second, the students can listen in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes: e.g., phone conversations, group discussions, formal speeches, oral reading, and student presentations. Third, the students can develop their social skills through listening: e.g., attending to speaker questioning for clarification, using and interpreting nonverbal summarizing, and paraphrasing to demonstrate understanding. Fourth, the students can use listening effectively as a means of learning and connecting to prior knowledge.
2 Teach listening skills

According to Willis (1981), there are a series of micro skills of listening which she calls enabling skills. They are:

- guessing at unknown words or phrases without panic
- using one's own knowledge of the subject to help one understand
- identifying relevant points; rejecting irrelevant information
- retaining relevant information; note-taking; summarizing
- recognizing discourse markers (Well, Oh, another thing is, Now, Finally, etc.)
- understanding intonation patterns and uses of stress (etc.) which give clues to meaning and social setting
- understanding inferred information (e.g., speakers' attitude or intentions)

It is of vital importance that our students be taught to listen effectively and critically while actually they are not introduced to the skills and put them into their practice.

3 Foster students' comprehension of the language and ideas by designing proper questions

Certain tasks can attract students' participation. Active participation in the listening experience helps students comprehend the speakers' language and ideas connecting them to what they already know about language and the topic. By checking the answers to the questions to monitor their own understanding of the speaker's message, e.g., asking themselves “Does this make sense?” students know when to request clarification of what they do not understand. To encourage students' critical reactions and personal responses to the speaker's ideas and use of language should be teachers' main duty. Students who listen attentively, jotting notes and questions, and responses are better prepared to interact with the speaker during or after listening.

4 Post-listening: Responding and Reflecting and Reconstructing Understanding

Follow-up activities to listening experiences are critical because they extend students' learning and encourage students to understand that there are purposes for listening and emphasize that the information gained will be useful to them. Post-listening activities are most effective when implemented immediately after the listening experience becomes a direct extension of it. Well-planned post-listening activities offer students opportunities to connect what they have heard to their own ideas and experiences and encourage interpretive and critical listening and reflective thinking. It is important to encourage students to reflect and to clarify and extend their thinking about what they have heard by making concrete responses which may be written (spoken, visual, or dramatic). So certain activities and assignments must be designed by the teacher in order to enhance students' comprehension.

4 Cultivating a good environment

Cultivating a good environment for improving listening comprehension is imperative for improving the students' comprehension. Exposure to oral English is very important to improve students' listening comprehension. So it is very important for the teachers to create a good English learning environment and provide the students with many accessible resources. The students need to hear the language spoken in meaningful contexts in order to acquire it. Their receptive language abilities precede their expressive speaking language abilities so they need to spend a great deal of time listening before and as they develop their speaking abilities.

References


