LEARNING TO LISTEN METACOGNITIVELY

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Abstract

Learning any language requires the development of receptive skills and productive ones. In other terms, listening, reading, speaking and writing are the major four building blocks. This piece of work focuses mainly on the listening skill as being a highly complicated activity demanding lot of efforts from the learner to construct meaning. Therefore, it is with the perspective to teach EFL/ESL learners how to listen instead of making them listen to learn that this work is achieved.

Keywords

Listening Skill; Learning Strategies; Meta Cognitive Strategies; Listening Instruction

1. Introduction

In our daily interaction language is used to fulfil many different goals such as communicating information, ideas, beliefs, emotions and attitudes to one another. When using language for communication, both the addresser and the person receiving the oral message are involved in two major processes: transmitting information and interpreting the message produced. The same processes take place when learning another language as English. The latter requires a combination of knowledge of the target language with strategies that enable to use it effectively.

Listening as a skill was marginalized in language teaching for very long time. It was assumed that listening in a second language could be acquired via exposing learners to authentic language but not through explicit teaching. Thus, instructional methods were mainly focused on productive skills. It was only until recently that this stand has changed to be substituted by an active interest in instructing listening comprehension skills as its role is at the heart of second language acquisition (Rubin 1988; O'Malley et al 1989; Bacon 1991; Thompson and Rubin 1996; Vandergrift 1996; Goh 1997; Goh 2002a; Vandergrift 2003b ; Goh and Taib 2006; Graham and Macaro 2008; Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari 2010; Coşkun 2010 and Bozorgian and Alamdari 2013).

The purpose of this paper lies not only on exploring what applied linguistics research say about the listening skill but also on identifying the strategies that can eventually be employed to help learners to listen better. Furthermore, the emphasis is put on instructing strategies that can enable students to overcome their difficulties and improve their competence as far as listening comprehension area is concerned. Accordingly, reviewing the historical development of listening through time, elucidating the meaning of this concept as well as the importance of strategy instruction requires to be discussed.

2. Historical Overview

Before reaching the actual state, listening comprehension had long been treated as "the Cinderella" (Flowerdew and Miller, 2005) of the other skills: speaking, reading and writing. Researchers also regarded it as an ability that would develop without the teacher's help. It has undergone in the past few decades many changes with the diverse teaching approaches developed over the years.

Indeed, arguments for listening comprehension started to appear in the mid- 1960's by Rivers who has been "long an advocate for listening comprehension" (Morley, 2001: 70). The latter, claimed that "teaching the comprehension of spoken speeches is therefore of primary importance if the aim of communication is to be reached" (Rivers 1966: 204).

Then, gradually, interest in listening comprehension began to rise gradually by 1970's where the status of the latter began to gain more importance. Besides reading, writing and speaking skills, instructional programs included listening skill. By the 1980's, lot of curricula concerned with this complex skill were realized. Throughout the 1990's, an increase of

attention to the teaching of listening was witnessed and aural comprehension in second or foreign language acquisition became an important area of study.

Listening is now viewed as an active skill involving many processes; however, much work remains to be done since this skill, as Byrnes (1984: 318) characterizes it, is a "highly complex problem solving activity that can be broken down into a set of distinct sub-skills". Additionally, Goh (1997) and Richards (1989) stress the fact that the studies available on listening are not enough comparing with other skills.

3. Hearing and Listening

When talking about listening, there is a tendency to confuse it with hearing which is in fact "a dangerous misconception" (Burley- Allen 1995: 03) leading us to believe that it is instinctive. In reality, listening involves a more sophisticated mental process than hearing. According to Burley-Allen (1995: 03), it requires "energy and discipline" to be learnt. Therefore, this leads us to say that it is not "a passive skill" (Osada 2004: 53) but an active process needing assistance to develop (Byrnes 1984; Richards 1989 and Goh 1997).

By examining the definitions attributed both to hearing and listening, we find that these two concepts differ from each other. In fact, Devito's definition of hearing as "a passive physiological process where vibrations impose on your eardrums and requires little effort from you" (1992: 54 as cited in McMurray et al 2004: 223) exhibits the features of hearing. The latter is presented as being passive, requiring no reflection from the part of the hearer. Besides, it is involuntary as the sounds are received without the hearer's will. Moreover, it is effortless as it does not require the hearer to furnish any energy to receive the signals of the acoustic message transmitted.

On the other hand, McMurray et al (2004: 223) define listening as "an active process requiring effort on your part to connect with another by interpreting their signals and messages. Active listening requires the most energy because it requires serious attention and concentration". Therefore, with reference to this definition, some features of listening can be stated. First, listening is an active process, which implies it requires lot of energy from the part of the listener to concentrate and receive the signals attentively. Second, listening needs lot of effort from the listener to receive the transmitted message, decipher it and comprehend it. Finally, listening involves the will of the listener to give an ear and pay attention to the aural discourse transmitted.

Obviously, from the definitions outlined above it appears that differentiating the concepts of listening and hearing has brought some insights into the features of the latter. Likewise, the ambiguity that was covering the issue existing between hearing and listening concepts has been cleared up. Consequently, everything addressed in this piece of work regards listening.

4. Listening Importance

The crucial role that the listening skill plays in communication has been emphasized by lot of scholars (Rost 1991; Rubin 1995 and Burley–Allen 1995). Oxford (1993: 205) also put stress on the importance of this receptive skill and argued that "listening is perhaps the most fundamental language skill".

Moreover, research suggests that there is no output from the part of the learners unless there exists a comprehensible input (Krashen 1982, 1985). Therefore, learners attempting to acquire a second language are required to pay great attention to listening to the target language, which is not an easy task. According to Rubin (1995: 08), second or foreign language learners face lot of difficulties when processing the aural input. Indeed, the latter demands prompt reception and interpretation of the transmitted information "whereas in reading, learners can go over the text at leisure".

Continuing with the importance of listening in our daily life, Burley–Allen (1995: 2) underlined this aspect on the ground of statistical calculations. According to him, the largest portion (40%) of our daily communication is devoted to listening, with thirty five (35%) being dedicated to speaking, sixteen (16%) is devoted to reading and only nine (09%) is occupied by writing.

The importance of this aural skill has also been emphasised by Rost (1991: 141 -142) who summarised listening importance in three major points. First, listening provides information to the learner. Second, listening to authentic language compels the learner to comprehend language as it is used by native speakers. Finally, instructors can make use of the new forms included in the listening tasks such as vocabulary and grammar to develop the learners' language.

5. Language Learning Strategies

In fact, several terminologies (Chamot and Kupper 1989; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Morley 1993; McDonough 1995; Oxford 1994, 2001 and 2005) had been attributed to

language learning strategies such as techniques, special thoughts, behaviors, measures, actions, and operations employed by learners to solve problems posed by second language input or output.

Besides, investigations undertaken in the field of foreign language learning have generated various definitions regarding what constitutes learning strategies. This diversity presents a challenge for educators in terms of selecting appropriate strategies to attain their teaching goals. This process of strategy search is referred by Ellis (1986: 188) as "stumbling blind folded round a room to find hidden objects".

In this respect, it is worth noting that though the definitions proposed differ in the way of describing learning strategies, they seem to share the same idea suggesting that they are conscious actions; however, once the user becomes accustomed to them, they turn out to be ''automatic'' ; i.e. unconscious (Oxford, 1990: 12).

5.1. Reasons for Teaching Strategies

As it has been mentioned previously, strategies are the purposeful actions that learners make use of in order to achieve their learning goal. They play a crucial role in the learning process. Thus, strategy instruction is concerned with facilitating the process of learning by raising students' awareness about some strategies that enable them to have insight into control over their process of learning.

Furthermore, strategy instruction can help learners in many ways such as removing their anxiety, fostering their self-confidence and making them autonomous individuals (Flavel 1979, Graham and Macaro 2008; Goh 2008; Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari 2010; Coşkun 2010; Bozorgian and Alamdari 2013; Goh and Hu 2013; Zeng 2014). In this context, Oxford & Leaver (1996: 227) wrapped up the whole benefits that can be gained from strategy instruction in five major points:

> "...Strategy instruction teaches students how to be better learners in several
> specific ways: (1) identifying and improving strategies that are currently used
> by the individuals; (2) identifying strategies that the individual might not be
> using but that might be helpful for the task at hand, and then teaching those
> strategies; (3) helping students learn to transfer strategies across language
> tasks and even across subject fields; (4) aiding students in evaluating the
> success of their use of particular strategies with specific tasks; and (5)

assisting subjects in gaining learning style flexibility by teaching them strategies that are instinctively used by students with other learning styles".

Therefore, the major objective of strategy training is to supply students with effective tools that enable them to become more self-directed, autonomous and efficient learners. However, strategy training that aims at awareness-raising should not be looked at as an ultimum solution or the key for every learning problem but is just a means to meet learners' needs.

6. Implications and Suggestions for Teachers

The findings reached by cognitive studies reviewed in the literature provide us with implications and suggestions that can be adopted by second or foreign language listening teachers which are worthy to be considered. The first one regards the crucial role that metacognitive instruction plays in promoting language development, and the other one is linked to the application of Vandergrift and Goh (2012) metacognitive pedagogical sequence.

As concerns metacognitive instruction as the key element to improve listening comprehension, many studies undertaken by many scholars (Rubin 1988 ; O'Malley et al 1989 ; Bacon 1991 ; Thompson and Rubin 1996 ; Vandergrift 1996 ; Goh 1997 ; Goh 2002a ; Vandergrift 2003b ; Goh and Taib 2006 ; Graham and Macaro 2008 ; Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari 2010; Coşkun 2010, Bozorgian and Alamdari 2013, and Goh and Hu 2014) revealed the important role that metacognitive strategies play in assisting students to self-regulate their learning and raising students' awareness about learning processes in which they are involved.

Therefore, language teachers concerned with the instruction of the listening skill are invited to integrate metacognitive strategies in their courses with the purpose to help the less skilled learners to gain confidence and be efficient in their listening outcome. This can be achieved via setting out a thorough lesson plan focused on metacognitive strategy instruction. This lesson plan is of great help for the instructor as it will not only serve as a map to guide the teacher in the lesson development but also it will provide him/her with a clear picture of how much has been achieved and how much remains to be fulfilled. Furthermore, the lesson plan will give the opportunity to the teacher to look back at his/her achievements and think of appropriate solutions to fix any issues faced while applying metacognitive strategies.

Regarding the metacognitive framework to L2 instruction as proposed by Vandergrift and Goh (2012), the model offers principles that foster learners' self- regulation of listening. In fact, when applying this model in the language classroom, teachers can help learners discover new ways of learning languages effectively and easily via modelling the new strategy, thus making training explicit. Another implication for teaching is that when approaching the listening task metacognitively, the learners will be involved in a series of processes encompassing reflection, prediction, monitoring and evaluation. Consequently, by adopting such approach in listening instruction, the teacher will not only develop learners' knowledge about their own thinking but also will encourage them to adopt strategies that promote their self- regulation and autonomy.

Furthermore, other implications deserve to be taken into account. Bearing in mind that during the process of L2 listening comprehension, learners make use of two types of processes to extract meaning from an aural input. These are called by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000:103) "bottom up and top down processing". It is necessary to underline that the interaction between knowledge of the language system (i.e. phonology, grammar and vocabulary) and prior knowledge and experience is crucial for speech comprehension. Therefore, to help learners compensate for their deficiency in understanding the input, teachers are conveyed to initiate them to make use of listening strategies and metacognition.

As concerns the grammatical aspect of spoken language, teachers are invited to raise students' awareness about the difference existing between the language of written texts and spoken language. The latter is generally full of repetitions, pauses, discourse markers, false starts, restructuring and incomplete sentences. Thus, by encouraging learners to observe and analyse language for themselves through the implementation of audio-video talks supported by transcripts in their courses, teachers will allow learners time to notice features of spoken language that cannot be found in textbooks.

In fact, introducing authentic language in the language classroom provides an opportunity to the students to explore language as interaction rather than as grammatical units. Consequently, the Algerian EFL learners' tendency to make sense of language and systematize it will be reinforced. Moreover, teachers are invited to initiate student in tasks aiming at making comparisons between the spoken and the written forms of English by looking at transcripts of natural language, such as the samples presented in the appendices.

Regarding the vocabulary included in the aural speech, one way to address the problem of language difficulty is to pre-teach students vocabulary which is included in the listening text. Another way to face this obstacle is to expose learners to intensive and extensive listening programs. These procedures according to Harmer (2001: 204) "will make students more positive about listening; improve their overall comprehension skills, and give them a wider vocabulary".

As far as dictating is concerned, the latter helps learners' comprehension by paying more attention to content words that convey meaning especially for lower proficiency learners. The current practice of listening out for key words seems to be justified by Field's study (2008: 428) as cited in Kurita (2012: 39). In fact, he provided the following implications:

> "In the early stages of listening development, learners should be asked to build a general and sometimes approximate meaning representation on the basis of the more prominent content words in the text; however, as listening competence improves, instructors might move on from meanings to forms that can be applied to teaching listening."

Reducing listening anxiety by building confidence in listening to English is another point deserving to be taken into account. In reality, "confidence is the most vital element in learning to listen effectively in a second or a foreign language" (Hedge, 2000: 255). This confidence can be raised by practice. Besides, Krashen (1982: 33) underlined the crucial role that the affective filter plays in second language acquisition. According to him, two conditions are necessary to achieve learning: "The first is comprehensible (or even better, comprehended) input containing i + 1, structures a bit beyond the acquirer's current level, and the second is a low or weak affective filter to allow the input "in".

Therefore, the teachers concerned with EFL listening comprehension instruction are required to provide as much practice as possible by adopting diverse measures such as talking to learners in the target language, exposing them to authentic material and encouraging them to use all available listening resources. Likewise, teachers are required to offer an adequate environment where low affective variables are available to allow learning to take place.

Keeping on the same track with Krashen's affective variables, attracting the learners' interest and motivating them is of great importance to achieve success in listening. Accordingly, it is necessary for teachers to consider this aspect of learning when picking up topics or preparing listening materials. In fact, when a topic is interesting, it creates enjoyment that contributes to motivation. Whereas, when the choice of topic is inappropriate, it generates boredom that hinders comprehension.

7. Conclusion

Listening to a language that one is not familiar with constitutes a hard work. In fact, though listening represents a crucial skill for learning any language, its complex nature makes it a challenging affair for both the learners and the teachers. It requires the learners to be guided and assisted in their efforts to reach success. In other terms, the teachers are expected to furnish the appropriate measures to achieve the teaching goals. However, when doing so, they find themselves testing the students' listening capacities instead of supplying them with the strategies that may facilitate their learning. This makes of learners passive recipients of instruction as the learning is centred on the teacher.

Consequently, it is with the perspective to teach students how to listen rather than making them listen to learn that this piece of work is realised. In other words, bringing students to reflect on the process of listening without being afraid of evaluation is probably the missing ingredient in the teaching practices. Therefore, by focusing on the process of listening, the responsibility of learning will shift from the teacher to the learners. The latter will be more involved in making use of useful tools that enable them to complete their listening tasks successfully.

Additionally, in order to bring forward the teaching of the listening skill, teachers are invited to develop a dual objective in the language classroom. In other terms, in addition to the teaching of the language content, they are also required to develop students' learning processes that will provide learners with self confidence and autonomy to learn both inside the language classroom and outside the teaching context.

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