

ON SOME STRATEGIES OF DEVELOPING LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Listening plays a crucial role both in everyday communication and educational process. A successfully organized listening class which normally involves a wide range of pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening activities results in successful speaking and writing. However, listening activities require not only concentration, vocabulary and background knowledge, but some mental processes such as short-term and long-term memories. Two different kinds of processes are also involved in understanding spoken discourse – bottom-up and top-down processing. When designing tasks we should not demand that our students remember more details than a native speaker would in a real life situation.

Key words: *listening comprehension, short-term and long-term memory, bottom-up and top-down processing, pre-listening activity, while-listening activity, post-listening activity*

The main purpose of teaching listening is to enable students to understand spoken English. Different activities help students with the aspect of understanding: hearing all the words the speaker says, deducing the meaning of unknown words and phrases by using the context, understanding what is implied but not stated in the words, recognizing speakers' mood, intention, attitude, and the degree of formality with which speakers are talking, etc.

The teaching of listening has attracted a greater level of interest in recent years than it did in the past. Although once labeled a passive skill, listening is very much an active process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues /Richards, 1983: 219-240/. According to Rivers listening is a critical element in the competent language performance of second language learners, whether they are communicating at school, at work, or in the community. Through the normal course of a day, listening is used nearly twice as much as speaking and four to five times as much as reading and writing /Rivers, 1981/.

However, as Morley states, listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning despite the recognition of the critical role it plays both in communication and in language acquisition /Morley, 1991/.

Listening is a demanding process, not only because of the complexity of the process itself, but also due to factors that characterize the listener, the speaker, the content of the message, and any visual support that accompanies the message /Brown & Yule, 1983/.

Thus, while teaching listening one should understand that the remaining three skills are necessarily to be employed – speaking (discussion), writing (written form of opinion presentation), and further reading on the topic.

No matter how interconnected are all four skills there are situations when listening acts on its own – when listening to radio and TV news, instructions and

directions, lectures, etc. However, the so-called pure listening is almost never possible, as while listening we make observations, speak, write and share information.

Listening differs from other skills of speech activities. While listening, you may have only one chance to hear the text, which means the learner is to perceive and understand the information while listening to it. However, even if the listener succeeds in doing the above mentioned, to hear and understand the words, phrases and sentences is not enough, as to memorize the information is even a greater difficulty. It is here that the listeners face the difficulty of putting together whatever they have heard. And it is not the listener's fault to have the so-called short-term memory, it's a mental ability. Another difficulty is pronunciation, stresses, style of speaking, vocabulary and the text itself which may differ from speaker to speaker.

Listening is the skill that requires both physical and mental preparedness. From the perspective of physical preparedness the listener should be relaxed, concentrated but not tense, as tension and fear do not allow to understand and memorize, making the process of listening less effective. Mental preparedness requires two types of memories - short-term and long-term. Thus, our task is to teach our students the skill of how to listen and to what to listen, as these two factors are the bases for listening comprehension.

When starting a listening class the teacher should prepare the class by giving the right instructions such as to relax and not concentrate on the unknown words. While trying to guess the meanings of unknown words the listeners miss the rest of the message. The teacher must always take into consideration the level of the class, while giving the right instructions. Pre-listening activities are mostly required to be practised at beginner and intermediate levels, e.g. to ask questions on the topic using words and structures of the message. Groups with upper-intermediate and advanced levels may be required to do post-listening activities, such as exercises with multiple-choice answers and further develop the listening topic either in the form of discussion or a written comment. There are many opportunities to integrate listening with the practice of other language skills, especially at the post-listening stage.

Two different kinds of processes are involved in understanding spoken discourse. These are often referred to as bottom-up and top-down processing. Bottom-up processing refers to using the incoming information as the basis for understanding the message. Comprehension begins with the received data which is analyzed as the successive levels of organization - sounds, words, clauses, sentences, texts - until the meaning is arrived at. Comprehension is viewed as a process of decoding. The listener's grammatical and lexical competence in a language provides the basis for bottom-up processing. Bottom-up strategies are text-based; the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning. Bottom-up strategies include:

- listening for specific details,
- recognizing cognates,
- recognizing word-order patterns.

Top-down processing refers to utilizing schemata (background knowledge and global understanding) to derive meaning from and interpret the message. This might entail discussing the steps in the polishing process, reviewing vocabulary or

generating a list of questions that the learner should answer. Top-down strategies are listener based; the listener taps into background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text, and the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that help the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. Top-down strategies include:

- listening for the main idea,
- predicting,
- drawing inferences,
- summarizing.

Effective instructions show students how they can adjust their listening behavior to deal with a variety of situations, types of input, and listening purposes. They help students develop a set of listening strategies and match appropriate strategies to each listening situation.

As it has already been mentioned memory plays a very important if not one of the decisive roles in the course of listening. Thus, there are two recognized types of memories – the short-term or operative memory and long-term memory. The short-term memory lasts not more than 10 seconds during which the brain sorts out information. It is natural that for learners with long-term memory it is easier to overcome such technical difficulties as memorizing words and sentences and the message as a whole. However, it is possible to develop the short-term memory into the long-term one via exercises aimed at developing the memorizing skill. The following type of exercise may help to develop the short-term memory: the teacher pronounces three or four words and the student is to repeat them and each time the number of words must be increased until the student is not able to memorize them.

The teacher can facilitate the development of listening ability by creating successful listening lessons that guide the learner through three stages: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening tasks. When planning a listening class the teacher must think over the pre-listening activities which are especially efficient in groups with a beginner or intermediate level. The teacher gives the title of the message and discusses the topic using the words and terms related to it. Thus, using their background knowledge students may guess the context of the message to be heard. When dealing with the term background knowledge one should not confuse it with imagination or fantasy. The background knowledge in its turn may be structural and contextual. Contextual prediction is based on the awareness of the topic, while the structural one is based on the good command of different grammatical structures, collocations, idioms and phrasal verbs.

During pre-listening activities the teacher prepares and motivates the students by briefly talking about the topic and mentioning the key words or asking general questions about the text they are going to hear – it is vital that we cover the specific vocabulary and expressions that students will need. The teacher should assess students' background knowledge of the topic and linguistic content of the text, as well as provide students with the background knowledge necessary for their comprehension of the listening passage or activate the existing knowledge that the students possess and clarify any cultural information which may be necessary to comprehend the passage. Background knowledge may be both an advantage and disadvantage for students. If the background knowledge concerns a generally known

phenomenon, or if the listeners have some knowledge on the topic, then background knowledge is an advantage. However, in case of cultural differences it may be misleading and can create major comprehension difficulties. The teacher should also make sure students know what to do exactly. This activity should establish the purpose of the listening activity and activate the schemata by encouraging the learners to think about and discuss what they already know about the content of the listening text. This activity can also provide the background needed for them to understand the text, and it can focus attention on what to listen for. To engage students in pre-listening activities the teacher may present the title of the text and discuss the topic preparing the students for the activity, ask questions on the related topic, thus checking their background knowledge, giving hints, allowing students to think over the topic to be listened to. Pre-listening stage may involve a whole range of activities:

- general questions on the topic,
- covering the vocabulary,
- making predictions (let students read the post-listening multiple-choice comprehension questions before they listen to the message and imagine the situation).

It is important not to forget to give students while-listening activities giving time to read through the tasks before listening, as during the listening they are to be fully concentrated. For while-listening activities handouts with some simple questions enabling students to answer them in the process of listening should be prepared, i.e. at the end of the listening the students should have answered WH questions which will ease their work in the process of post-listening activities. Another motivating while-listening activity is to ask students to write down in columns as many words as they manage to hear; this activity requires concentration and speed. Here the teacher's advice is not to concentrate on all the words, especially unknown ones, for the students when hearing an unknown word stop listening to the rest of text which is a difficulty to overcome. This task is followed by instructing students to count the words and then to group them by either of the principles – parts of speech, place names and dates, etc. While-listening activities may include the following tasks:

- while listening to the message write down as many words as possible,
- make notes,
- answer the WH questions,
- while listening for long stretches, concentrate and try to remember key words and phrases,
- pay attention to place names, dates, names and numbers,
- fill in graphs and charts,
- search for specific clues to meaning,
- distinguish between formal and informal registers.

The post-listening stage is where the teacher can determine how well the students have understood what they have listened to. One important point to keep in mind is whether we are testing the students' listening comprehension or their

memory. Even in our own language we remember the gist of the conversation, but we cannot remember and repeat exactly the words we have heard if the listening text is too long or complicated. A post-listening activity aims to utilize the knowledge gained from listening for the development of speaking and writing skills. This activity should help the listener to evaluate success in carrying out the task and to integrate listening with the other language skills. Post-listening activities are mainly of two basic types - activities based on the discussion of the message (text) and the analysis of the language. Actually the latter is a supplement for the first one. The most common type of post-listening tasks is the multiple-choice comprehension questions. The students may be offered to take notes and after listening work in pairs or groups to reconstruct the text they have heard and compare their version of the text with the original one, sentence by sentence. It is better to have the students look through the tasks to be completed, this may help students recognize the crucial parts of the message. Some post-listening activities are presented below:

- group the words written down while listening to the message according to one of the principles (parts of speech, idioms, collocations, geographical place names, etc.),
- say if the information of the message is presented in chronological order, in order of importance, a cause followed by an effect or classifications with examples,
- express your own opinion on the topic (the activity is possible to be presented both in written and oral forms),
- multiple-choice comprehension questions,
- open-ended questions,
- give a couple of minutes to tidy up the notes and write the summary of the passage based on their notes (it is not necessary to use the original words from the text).

Broadly, listening exercises usually fall into three basic types: controlled, guided and free:

- Controlled activities require complete and clear directions. This type of activities is more practical with the beginner level students. These may be describing the appearance and recognizing the person on the picture, or answering some simple post-listening questions.
- Guided activities are for a higher level of students. In this case the students are provided with partial outlines and incomplete frameworks which they are to complete. The students listen to a story and then are required to create a similar story or continue it.
- Students with advanced level are given free activities. Students may listen to a piece of song or melody and then be required to write down about their feelings the music has evoked or to write about an experience the music may be associated with.

Another important type of listening is *Global listening*, known as listening for gist, is an activity when students listen to something and try to understand it in more general way. Global listening occurs when we simply want to get the point of

what we are listening to. With native speakers global listening may occur simultaneously while doing other activities, i.e. driving, cooking, etc. With learners of a foreign language this is quite a different matter. Listening requires much effort with the learners as they are to concentrate, and may feel the need to understand the meaning of each word, and if they do not they may give up completely. Their listening may be interrupted by noise, poor sound quality, which is generally not a problem for the native speakers. Thus, as was mentioned previously, our task is to help our students overcome the above-mentioned problems, and first of all teach them how to listen, by giving them appropriate instructions and exercises. In this type of listening activity the students are required to have developed the first level of listening, that is, sound recognition and recognizing and identifying different intonation patterns. Short passages and dialogues are recommended to be used to develop the first level of listening skills. Here many techniques for presentation and reading comprehension are quite suitable. Thus, global listening material should be short and easily comprehended; listening tasks can be focused on tenses, word order and new vocabulary. The students must remember that many words are not essential to get the message. They should also be aware of the language clues which help predict what is coming, like “the *thing is...*, *I’m afraid, but....*, *there is one point I would like to...*, *on the one hand...*, *although...*, *the first thing....*, etc.”. Texts in which the events are presented in natural chronological order are easier to follow – main idea first, details, examples and conclusion.

Listening strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension listening. Each of the above-mentioned activities and techniques stipulates an ESL listening class. Pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening activities give opportunity to organize an efficient interactive lesson, thus incorporating speaking and writing skills. Listening plays a significant role in daily communication as well as in educational process. Listening classes offer great opportunities to teach new words and review vocabulary. However, while organizing a listening comprehension class the teacher should always keep in mind that listening in a foreign language and out of real situation is not an easy task for a learner and the main goal of a teacher is to help overcome all the obstacles and succeed in mastering listening skills.

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Ի. ԲՈՒՌՆԱԶՅԱՆ – *Լսելով ընկալելու հմտության զարգացման որոշ սկզբունքների մասին.* – Լսելով ընկալելու հմտությունը կարևոր դեր է կատարում ինչպես ամենօրյա հաղորդակցման, այնպես էլ՝ ուսուցման գործընթացում: Լսելով ընկալելու հմտությունը զարգացնելու նպատակով առաջարկում ենք մի շարք վարժություններ, որոնք կարող են իրականացվել մինչև ունկնդրելը, ունկնդրելու ընթացքում և ունկնդրելուց հետո: Վարժություններն ուղղված են ուսանողների բառապաշարի և հիմքային գիտելիքի ակտիվացմանը, ինչպես նաև երկարատև հիշողության զարգացմանը, որոնցով պայմանավորված է լսելով ընկալելու ունակությունը: Լսելով ընկալելու հմտության գործընթացի ամենակարևոր սկզբունքներից է վարից-վեր և վերից-վար վերլուծության սկզբունքը: Ունկնդրել ուսուցանելիս անհրաժեշտ է հիշել, որ լսելով ուսանողը չի կարող մտապահել ավելի շատ մանրամասներ, քան լեզվակիրը իրական կյանքի իրավիճակում:

Բանալի բառեր. լսելով ընկալման հմտություն, կարճատև և երկարատև հիշողություն, վարից վեր և վերից վար վերլուծության սկզբունք, մինչև ունկնդրելը, ունկնդրելու ընթացքում և ունկնդրելուց հետո հանճնարարություններ

II. БУРНАЗЯН – *О некоторых стратегиях развития навыков аудирования.* – Аудирование играет значительную роль как в повседневной коммуникации, так и в процессе обучения. Успешно спланированный урок по аудированию включает в себя ряд «дотекстовых», «текстовых» и «послетекстовых» заданий, которые в свою очередь могут служить основой для организации эффективных уроков по говорению и письму. Однако в аудировании важны не только концентрация, словарный запас и фоновые знания, но и кратковременная и долговременная память. Принцип анализа «снизу-вверх» и «сверху-вниз» является одним из основополагающих принципов в процессе восприятия устной речи. При планировании и подготовке заданий по аудированию важно также помнить, что при прослушивании текста студенты не могут запомнить больше деталей, чем носители языка в реальной жизненной ситуации.

Ключевые слова: восприятие устной речи, краткосрочная и долгосрочная память, принцип анализа «снизу вверх» и «сверху вниз», дотекстовые задания, текстовые задания, послетекстовые задания