

The Role of Listening in ESP Classes

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Abstract: In today's society, good communication skills are becoming increasingly important. In the workplace, the ability to communicate clearly and effectively with superiors, coworkers and customers is essential, no matter what industry you work in. A good communicator is able to express their thoughts and opinions, but also to listen to other people. At first sight, listening seems to be a simple concept, but, in reality, few people are adept at listening. Although it was neglected in the past, the teaching of listening skills currently plays an important role in the language classroom.

Keywords: communication; listening; comprehension; active

1. Introduction

Although the listening skill is part and parcel of any social interaction, listening is far from getting the same attention as speaking. People receive more information by listening than they do by reading, writing or speaking. Yet, listening is our weakest skill. By recognizing the barriers to effective listening and adopting good listening habits, people can become better listeners and thus be valued in their everyday lives as well as in the workplace. The huge developments in both audio and visual technology offer a wide variety of listening materials which motivate learners to improve their listening skills.

Listening is a receptive type of speech activity, representing the simultaneous perception and understanding of speech by ear. It is the ability to receive and interpret messages in the communication process. Listening is essential to all effective communication. It is not synonymous with hearing. The former is an active process which requires paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal messages whereas the latter is a physical process referring to the sounds that enter your ears.

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In spite of its obvious importance to the process of language learning and teaching, the listening skill was for a long time neglected by curriculum developers. With the advent of communicative language teaching, it started to receive more attention. Listening is currently perceived as a skill that enables learners to effectively extract content information from input. According to Ginther (2002) and Ockey (2007), listening means more than the mere understanding of the speakers' utterances. It also involves the perception of visual facets while dealing with the listening comprehension activities.

Comprehension of a lecture, seminar or business presentation involves the same two-stage process involved in L2 reading comprehension, the first stage being "processing of the language, the second being the change of the background, knowledge of the topic that results from the understanding of the language" (Dudley-Evans, 2007:102). Just like reading, listening requires students to understand topics they are more or less familiar with and to try to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context. Unlike reading tasks, listening activities do not give students the chance to look up new words in a dictionary and thus complete the task successfully.

2. Why is listening in English challenging?

Being involved in a conversation and not being able to follow your interlocutor is an embarrassing situation which can seriously affect your confidence level and lead to misunderstandings. Listening to extra materials outside the classroom might not be enough for ESP students. It will be helpful to pinpoint the main reason why they have difficulty in listening in English.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to reply to people when you don't understand what they say. Listening in English is difficult for two main reasons.

1. English is a "stress-timed" language. Some syllables and words are stressed while others aren't. Not hearing the contracted auxiliary "ve" in such a sentence as *I've finished work* does not really affect the meaning of the sentence. On the other hand, misunderstandings may occur if someone hears *You must do that* instead of *You mustn't do that*.

Native speakers tend to connect words rather than pronounce them separately. Sounds are sometimes omitted or combined. English learners are also puzzled by the variety of dialects and accents they hear.

2. Listeners may have a lot of trouble with the English vocabulary which is vast and constantly evolving. What learners should understand from the very beginning is that not knowing all the vocabulary is not a problem. What really matters while taking part in a conversation or listening to a presentation in English is to be able to understand the main point and not each and every detail.

3. Types of listening

There are two types of listening: active listening and passive listening. The former is the ability to concentrate on the speaker, absorb and process what they are saying. An

active listener is fully engaged in the listening process. Asking questions about the topic or paraphrasing to make sure you understand what you hear are essential steps in this communication process. Passive listening, on the other hand, refers to the way we listen to a person, without being really engaged in the listening process.

Harmer (2013) distinguishes between extensive and intensive listening. Both of them give learners the opportunity to hear various voices, to develop their speaking skills and to improve their pronunciation. Extensive listening has a lot of benefits for learners since it encourages them to choose their own materials depending on their interests and level of English and listen to them at their own pace, outside the classroom. Intensive listening refers to the use of recorded materials in the classroom. These materials have two main advantages: they expose learners to a variety of voices and they are easily portable and readily available.

4. Stages in the listening process

According to De Vito, there are five stages in the listening process: receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding (2000). During the first stage, the listener focuses on hearing the message, doing their best to isolate it from the rest of incoming stimuli. The understanding of the message is not an easy task. The message may be difficult to interpret even for experienced listeners if it is not formulated properly. In other cases, misunderstandings may occur not because the communication is affected by the speakers' or listeners' poor speaking/listening skills, but because the participants to the conversation belong to completely different backgrounds. Remembering is closely connected with understanding. Learners are unlikely to remember a message they did not understand in the first place. On the other hand, they may have understood the message perfectly and still have difficulty in remembering it because it is full of details. The same message may be evaluated in multiple ways by a variety of listeners. As far as responding is concerned, there are verbal and non-verbal means you can use to show that you agree or disagree with the message.

5. The importance of listening in ESP classes

In ESP classes, great emphasis is laid on the exact needs and interests of the students. Sysoyev (2000) highlights the importance of paying attention to the needs and interests of the learners: "It is very important to start the course-developing process with an analysis of the target group of students: many problems in L2 classes are a result of teachers not paying attention to learners' interests and ignoring students as a source of essential information". It is crucial that curriculum developers adapt the curriculum and teaching materials to the students' needs. In order to determine the exact needs of the students, a needs assessment takes place before starting the course. According to Javid, ESP courses should be aim-directed, learner-directed, and situation-directed (2013). The more the ESP teacher takes into account the students' listening needs, the more interesting activities he/she will be able to come up with.

Teaching listening skills is as challenging a task for ESP teachers as it is for ESL teachers. Successful listening skills are acquired over time and they require a lot of practice. As it has already been pointed out, having effective listening skills is as important as having good speaking skills. Being a good listener means being able to display interest in the topic discussed and interpreting correctly the information received. The ability to speak fluently is a key objective for most English learners whereas developing effective listening skills is often neglected by them. In technical universities, special importance should be attached to developing learners' listening skills since they will be highly valued in their future careers.

Engineers are expected to be good communicators. They need to communicate effectively with their managers, their coworkers as well as with their clients on a daily basis. Beyond strong technical knowledge, employers lay stress on other competencies. Those employees who possess strong communication skills can position themselves for leadership roles.

In their future careers, engineering students will often be faced with the necessity of getting useful information not only from written materials, but also from audio and video resources. Seeing the faster and faster advance of technology in our days, this necessity will undoubtedly be bigger and bigger. ESP teachers' main objective is to help learners develop their ability to listen for basic interpersonal, instructional and academic purposes. A number of sub-skills should be paid a lot of attention. These are listening for specific information, listening for general understanding, listening for pleasure, predictive listening and inferential listening.

6. Barriers to effective listening

A number of factors contribute largely to the success of a listening activity: the size of the classroom, the acoustics of the classroom, the equipment used as well as the quality of the recording. When carrying out a listening task, ESP students are likely to be faced with a number of obstacles. Thus, they have to cope with the intonation patterns and to recognize unit boundaries. Listeners also have to cope with the speed of delivery. Non-native speakers of English have difficulty in following a native speaker whose speech rate is very fast.

What most learners find most frustrating when it comes to developing their listening skills is the absence of rules. There are specific rules which support them in their effort to learn grammar, they can improve their speaking and writing skills doing certain exercises, but there are no rules that could guide them in their endeavor to become better listeners.

Most students tend to feel mentally blocked if they hear a word they don't know. If they get confused by unknown vocabulary or if they hear words they are familiar with, but which are used in different contexts with different meanings, they lose interest in the listening activity and start feeling demotivated. Their level of motivation is also influenced by the length and complexity of the recorded material.

Thus, lower level students find it hard to maintain interest in long and intricate materials.

Another barrier to effective listening is the learners' reluctance to take part in listening activities. Most students are more enthusiastic about speaking than they are about listening. Since they value speaking more than listening, they are more willing to get involved in speaking tasks than in listening activities.

Not listening to an appropriate material is discouraging for ESP students. The more familiar they are with the topic of the conversation or presentation, the easier it will be for them to listen. The learners' willingness to listen closely also depends on the speaker's language proficiency. A good speaker is likely to keep them focused and actively involved for much longer than one who is not fluent in English.

Another problem that ESP learners are faced with in the ESP setting is that they often listen only partially to what their interlocutor says, focusing on what he/she is about to say. Sometimes students find it hard to concentrate. Their lack of concentration may have various causes, but even a short break may seriously affect the comprehension process.

It is crucially important for ESP students to become aware of any bad habits that prevent them from being good listeners and to overcome all barriers to effective communication. It is equally important for them to give themselves time to see the results.

7. What should ESP teachers do to help their students overcome their listening comprehension difficulties

Some teachers take it for granted that their students know how to listen. Teaching students how to become successful listeners should be part of any ESP teacher's curriculum. It is the teacher's responsibility to teach them tips and tricks that lead to active listening. First of all, ESP teachers should allocate enough time to listening activities and select materials which are appropriate to the students' level of proficiency. Choosing the best materials may turn out to be quite a challenge for those teachers teaching heterogeneous groups of students. What may be perfectly accessible to some students may pose a lot of difficulties to other students. Grading materials from simple to complex will help students gain confidence in their listening skills.

Providing students with feedback will be beneficial for them. It will help students correct mistakes and not repeat them.

Teachers should find the right tools to help students see listening activities as entertaining and informative. They should encourage them to listen to music, watch movies and documentaries, and grab any chance to listen to native speakers. These are habits that will help them become successful listeners.

8. What should ESP students do to develop their effective listening

Sometimes students find it difficult to listen attentively and realize they are only half listening. They become distracted by external factors either because they find the

listening material too boring or because they find it too complicated to follow. What they need to do is to focus on what is being said and to try to ignore all potential distractions. They should also know that the main goal of listening is to understand, not to respond. If they are preparing their answer before the speaker has finished talking, they might miss some important information that could influence their answer.

Students should start by listening to comprehensible input, otherwise they might feel frustrated and confused. Besides, listening to enjoyable materials will keep them motivated and stimulated to continue listening. Learners should keep in mind that they should never panic if they do not understand everything they hear. Trying to translate into their L1 is not going to help them at all. The more learners are encouraged to interact with their colleagues and native speakers, the more chances they will have to become skilled listeners. To avoid monotony, learners should get engaged in various challenging activities.

Focused practice can help learners understand main contexts, enrich their vocabulary with new words, phrases and idioms and become familiar with various accents. The more learners listen, the more they hear. Listening to a recording twice or several times will undoubtedly help them understand much more than if they listened to it only once.

9. What materials should be used in ESP classes?

It is essential for ESP teachers to select authentic materials. In the present-day global markets, speaking and listening skills are seen as essential skills of real life. Listening activities should attempt to equip learners with the flexibility to deal with a variety of accents. Learners are more likely to communicate with non-native speakers of English than with native speakers.

Schiffirin (1996) states that traditional books offer insufficient content of the target language, failing to give students enough communicative input (as cited in Peacock, 1997). The author insists on using authentic materials such as audio-visual materials which will support learners in their endeavors to develop their communicative skills. According to Swaffar and Vlatten (1997), the use of video in the classroom exposes learners to authentic voices and different dialects, which provides them with cultural backgrounds (as cited in Salaberry, 2001). Peacock (1997) points out that a great number of authors believe that the use of authentic materials motivates learners in foreign language classes.

Recordings give learners the opportunity to practice the kind of listening which doesn't allow the listeners to interact with the speaker. Generally, listening happens during conversations and meetings where a person is in turn speaker and listener. ESP teachers should expose their learners to "live" voices as often as possible. A recording lacks the authenticity of a live voice. Thus, a conversation at the airport, for instance, seems perfectly authentic to the participants, but not to the people who listen to it in a completely different context.

Using the right resources for the learners' needs plays an essential part in teaching listening skills. Learners can practice to improve their skills while having fun if they use such resources as movies, TV shows, documentaries or podcasts. These can be especially useful if they deal with a technical topic which learners are already accustomed with and which they find interesting.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, although listening skills rarely receive the attention they should be paid, they are essential to the acquisition of a foreign language. Most people regard listening as a passive task, but it goes far beyond absorbing information from someone else. Learning to listen in the target language supports the development of the other three skills - speaking, reading and writing. Listening skills are highly valued by employers since people who possess them are able to understand tasks and projects, build strong relationships and handle conflicts in the workplace.

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