



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2019; 5(10): 309-312
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 07-08-2019
Accepted: 12-09-2019

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Improving listening skill for foreign language learners

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Abstract

The article explains that how to improve listening skills in foreign language learners. As many learners have confronted with some challenges to improve their listening skills. The aim of this paper is to find out how Afghan English teachers can help students to improve their listening skills. One of the basic problems among Afghan learners who want learn English is that the approaches English teachers use in Afghanistan are not more focused on listening skills. No attention or less consideration is paid on students' improvement of listening skills. Additionally, listening skills are extremely important in order to have accurate communication. In other words, listening is a critical element in the competent language performance of EFL learners, whether they are communicating at school, at work, or in the community.

Keywords: listening skill and foreign language learners

Introduction

Literature Review

Definition and Characteristics of Listening

Listening is the ability in oneself to get, interpret and understand messages accurately in the communication process. One has to pay attention to what is being said beneath the words. "Listening is the activity of paying attention that means trying to get meaning from something we hear" (Underwood, 1989, p. 1)". "There are many other factors that make listening difficult. For example, the factors that describe the listener, the speaker and the content of the message that accompanies the message" (Brown & Yule, 2002, pp 76)^[1]. They also stated interesting topics contribute to listeners' comprehension than the topics that are not of interest. In addition, they said that a listener who is an active participant in a conversation generally has more background knowledge to facilitate understanding of the topic than a listener who is ineffective, listening style on a conversation between two people whose communication has been recorded on an audiotape. However, in order to become a better listener, make yourselves aware of your current inactive listening style. Also, start paying attention exactly to whom you are talking to.

The Challenge of Teaching Listening Skills

Teaching listening skills is highly difficult for any EFL teacher. This is because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. In addition, excellent teaching approaches are available to be used for teaching listening effectively, but they are difficult to quantify. One of the biggest obstacles for students is often the mental block. While listening, some students suddenly attempt that they do not understand what is being said. At this point, many students just get caught up in an internal dialogue trying to translate a specific word. Some students decide that they cannot understand spoken English well and create problems for themselves.

The variety of tones and accent of people, various limited expressions and pronunciation, and using of slang in conversation are all the factors that make listening challenging (Rubin, 1995)^[12]. It time-consuming to get used to different dialects or accents before EFL learners can become better listeners. Meanwhile, the device of audio-visual system like head phones, tapes, TV's, shows, cassettes, and various types of exercises has made listening practice easier, problems still exist. These problems hinder communication as well as create a gap between the listener and speaker. Researchers make their efforts to seek new ways to deal with the problems and make it easier for learners and teachers.

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Moreover, Moore and Eva (1953)^[9] have found that some people are good at speaking, telling their stories and being able to inspire others. But being a good listener is often more important than speaking because it gives higher level of level of understanding about someone's situation, and helps to know what words are best to use and what words should be cut down. Should we look beyond the meanings of the people's words? Should we consider the vowels and the consonants to know their body language and tone of voice to get a deeper understanding of their feelings, beliefs, and thoughts? A good listener is attentive. They make good eye contact, do not interrupt while the other person is speaking and show eagerness towards what is being communicated. Listening and speaking are deeply integrated to each other as they can ease each other.

Strategies for Teaching Listening Skills

The implementation of 'Directed Listening Activity' would be productive in listening comprehension (Norman & Andrea, 2006)^[10]. In addition, assessments have a significant role in teaching listening skills (Funk & Winkle, 1991). Furthermore, they also added that teachers are not able to teach listening as an isolated subject. Therefore, listening activities should be included to all subjects in the program of study. According to the authors, one of the strategies that include listening comprehension is 'shared teaching' where in this kind of strategy both students and teacher can guide the discussion for listening comprehension. In addition, students are also taught four strategies such as question, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting. They found out these types of strategy students spent most of their class time in listening comprehension, so it is effective for them and also they gain feedback from their peers and teacher.

Sherrow (1971)^[13] has expressed that many students are not familiar with listening carefully in their first language. When a teacher speaks English, students are still able get the idea of what he is saying. In a foreign language, nevertheless, students must pay more attention for comprehension. Furthermore, when students take up a foreign language study, they are asked to be eye-minded, rather than ear-minded: they return more attention to information gained from books, explanation, black-boards, and overhead projectors, than to facts which they simply hear. Lastly, the usual idleness of ordinary speech makes very helpful listening unnecessary.

Thompson, (1991) has said that, in English as a foreign language, listening comprehension depends to the four primary events. EFL pioneers can support learners by emerging the resources, they concentrates on both the development of listening comprehension skills and the development of speaking skills. Therefore, consider that a listening passage can be made more challenging by four key influencing factors including: the number of speakers, the practical difficulty and level of the spoken material, the speed of the speech and the accent of the speakers in the passage and whether or not there is any outside support provided for the listening passage like: pictures, diagram, terminology, speech evaluation and language modeling by the teacher.

Spratt (2005)^[7] explained that if the EFL teacher is a native English speaker, the dialogues can be modeled in pronunciation and related speech. And, if the EFL teachers are not native English speakers, they do not have enough

speech and pronunciation in English, then other English speech modeling and input sources are also valuable to use. He also added that a precious audio-visual aspect is provided to (EFL) learners by native-speaker-produced in CDs and DVDs. In addition, online, and cable radio broadcasts can also be useful and are readily available in much of the world.

Thomas & Devine (1967)^[14] have said that by instruction listening ability can be improved. They also added that authentic teaching material, seating arrangements in the classroom have a direct impact on students listening comprehension. Therefore interesting topics widen students listening skills. Moreover, the latest studies indicate that the influence of personality is another factor which influences students listening skills.

"First language listening comprehension ability and second language ability comprehension affects second language listening. Listening is more than just hearing words." He has also claimed that listening is an active process by which students receive, construct meaning from, and answer to verbal and or nonverbal messages. Making students aware of various types of listening, the various purposes for listening, and making them a quality listeners are effective ways enhancing learners' listening skills. Dunkel (1991)^[3] stated that providing some pre-speaking period for the beginner levels learners has benefits. In delaying production, learners will be given opportunities to store information in their memories.

Van Duzer (1997)^[15] has said that learners need to be provided with three stages of listening: such as: pre-listening, listening task, and post listening activity. He also has said that during the pre- listening stage, teachers can decide that all students bring different backgrounds to the listening experience, beliefs, and attitudes, and the listeners will affect the understanding of the message. Before listening, learners should be provided with help and encouragement of the teachers for making them share what they already know about the subject. This is helpful in building basic background and to place purposes for listening.

On the other hand, some researchers explored some strategies as Nicholas (1948) claimed that in a normal conversation people listen and think for four times. Students have to be encouraged to use the 'rate gap' to actively procedure the point. In other words, to use the extra time wisely, there are a number of activities students can be encouraged to do. They can practise it to remember it. Moreover, they can repeat important points back to themselves. Temple and Gillet (1989) have said that that students need to act listening what they have heard to explain meaning and enlarge their thinking. In terms of post listening activities, they are as important as pre-listening activities and during activities. Students can ask questions themselves and the speaker share what they have understood from their listening.

Post-mortem is a highly helpful tool as students ought to talk about what the speaker talked about, explore certain explanations, and categorize related incidents from the story (Hook & Evans, 1991)^[6]. Also, Ur (1984) expressed that good listeners are good predictors; there are many different performances that can support students to predict the content of what they are going to listen to. Visual aids support learners' understanding. They grab attention of learners and encourage them to focus on the subject in hand. The teacher

should provide the background information to stimulate learners' plan because they will be better prepared to understand what they hear. For example, in a passage about Mark Twain, the teacher can offer the background information to start learners' plan, so they will be better prepared to understand what they hear.

Discussion and Implication of the Strategies in Afghanistan

As it was stated before, there are various strategies for teaching listening skills, but a number of these strategies are not productive specifically in Afghan context because Afghan teachers and learners are struggling with teaching and learning listening skills. For example, there is a significant difference in the subjects' use of listening strategies in English classrooms. These subjects are employing significantly more strategies after they received the instruction of listening strategies. As for the influence of strategy training on the use of individual listening strategy, results prove that there is no considerable increase of strategy use for the memory strategies 'using imagery' and 'semantic mapping.' some subjects also noted in their learning diaries that this strategy did not help since it was difficult to form an image for the vocabulary when they did not even know the word meanings. Therefore, strategy instruction seems to be not so effective for EFL students to learn remembering by means of visual images. Therefore, it seems cumbersome to implement this strategy in Afghan classrooms.

Furthermore, that subjects' use of some cognitive strategies did not increase significantly after the strategy instruction. These strategies which include reasoning deductively, analyzing expressions, analyzing contrastively across languages, translating, and transferring did not increase. On the other hand, significant increase of strategy use was found for such cognitive strategies as practicing naturalistically, using resources for receiving and sending messages, taking notes and highlighting since they were more real and mechanical in nature and thus can be taught more easily and effectively.

From the above mentioned data, I found out that there are various strategies that can bridge the gaps between listener and speaker. The researchers suggest different strategies to use in the classrooms such as: cognitive and metacognitive, pre-speaking period, and listening to lectures to know the second language. Here a question arises, what are the best strategies to improve listening skills of learner? One of the best strategies which is applicable in Afghan context is the predicting strategy. In predicting strategy, students are encouraged to predict what they are going to listen about. It provides them opportunity to improve their thinking and lead them become good predictors. It is the best methods to use in English classrooms. As Rubin (1995) [12] also argued that non-verbal cues can help students to predict wisely the listening task which they are going to listen.

Another strategy as stated Thomas and Devin (1967) [14] interesting materials and seating in the classroom are highly effective for students to improve their listening skills while they are going to do some drills in the classrooms. I believe that this is a fair strategy for Afghan learners. I can recall my own classes of having listening exercises which attract them fully to the subject matter. Students with lots of desire listened carefully and it was so effective. Listening has direct influence on the students' personality as Thomas and

Devine mentioned about in the literature above, Students can improve their personalities through listening skills drills. Afghan teachers can use in their classes CDs and DVDs or audio-visual materials for teaching listening skills, so students show interest in listening skills which improves by using these tools.

Afghan teachers should avoid using activities that tend to focus on memory rather than on the process of listening or that simply give practice rather than help learners develop listening ability. For example, simply having the learners listen to a passage followed by true/false questions might indicate how much the learners remembered rather than helping them to develop the skill of determining main idea and details. Pre- and post-listening task activities would help the learners to focus attention on what to listen for, to evaluate how exactly they succeeded, and to transfer the listening skill to the world beyond the classroom.

However, from the aforementioned expresses, listening skill classes should have well-structured pre-listening task, and post-listening stages. In real-life situations a listener often knows something which is going to be said, who is speaking or what the subject is going to be about. Rost (1990) said that the pre-listening step helps students to find out the aim of listening and provides the necessary background information. When doing exercises in the classroom, he also advises asking students to guess what they are going to hear next. Jones and Kim (1987) suggested that introducing some opening discussion in which students can talk together about their expectations and make predictions about what they are going to hear. The abilities of predicting what others are going to talk about and using one's own knowledge of the subject to help one understand are also stressed.

The literature review highlights the importance of researchers considering of assisting learners in the development of listening comprehension skills. As listening comprehension is a challenge due to lack of exposure and other factors like various dialects, accents, sounds and pronunciation, slang with various tones of voice of different people with diverse local expressions. It is a challenge that demands both the teacher's and the learner's attention because of the critical role that listening plays, not only in communication, but also in the acquisition of language. Listening comprehension is one of these important skills, and it must be learned if students are going to be successful in school. It is an important skill that affects people's daily lives, and ability in listening, and listening comprehension is very important. Students in school who obtain the majority of their information through lectures and discussion may assist from research identifying helpful strategies that improve listening comprehension Knowledge of the listening process and factors that affect listening enables teachers to select or create listening texts and activities that meet the needs of their adult EFL learners.

Conclusion

For learning a foreign language, it is important to improve four skills especially listening and reading. Consequently they need more time to learn a language by reading and listening. Reading and listening can help students in language acquisition. It seems that to put lots of correct sentences in your head. Moreover, listening is also very important in communication. People often focus on their speaking ability believing that good speaking equals good communication. The ability to speak well is a necessary

component to successful communication. In order to have communicate well students should improve their listening skills therefore, the ability to listen is equally as important.

There are many strategies by using those strategies students can improve their listening skills. The strategies are as follow Pre-listening Strategies, note taking, processing details, determining the relationships of ideas, guessing vocabulary from context, identifying pronoun referents and practice exercises. All of these strategies are very helpful for improving listening skills, especially; in the strategy of pre-listening students predict the themes and vocabulary of the lesson they are going to listen to for their classes. Another good strategy is that when students are listening to the lectures and get the main ideas from the lectures and presentations in the classes. Another importance of the strategy is which also can help students to improve their listening through take noting; which is effectively crucial to success in academic and professional environment.

I mainly focused on many aspects in teaching and improving listening skills in my paper. One of the biggest problems which all the time all the non-native speakers of English is struggling with is the usage of slangs in conversations, and the Variety of tones and accents of people, and also the different or limited expressions and mainly pronunciation. And also usage DVDs and CDs and audio lingual in the English classes.

According to several strategies mentioned by the some scholars, they imply some more strategies and procedures to improve students' listening skills. For example, using audio-visual materials, listening to mass media, lectures, giving lots of practice, drills, and quizzes can help students to improve their listening skills. In addition, tests to the students in class and giving actual life homework outside the class, structure first language listening ability, using of non-verbal cues can help to make easier the strategies which are mentioned above. As students master these metacognitive listening skills, their reading and listening comprehension improve. It seems that instructional strategies focusing on these skills should be implemented in the classroom.

Some of the strategies are effective for Afghan teachers they can get the benefits of those strategies in their teachings settings in English large classes for example the pre-listening tasks are very useful for Afghan teachers where they can attract the students' attention toward the text they are going to listen. From one hand this kind of strategy makes the environment of the classes challenging and competitive and students wanted to listen very carefully in order to answer the questions which they hear before the lesson. Different backgrounds to the listening experience, beliefs, attitudes, and biases of the listeners will affect the understanding of the message. But still some the strategies are not fit to Afghan context, because teachers in Afghanistan have some especial forms of problems like not having access to the audio- visual materials, some of the above methodologies which are not contain large English classes where is the major problem in Afghanistan are not taken into considerations.

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