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**Asst.Prof. Ibtisam Jassim
Mohammed**

 University of Tikrit / College of Education for
Humanities / Department of English

 * Corresponding author: E-mail :
ibtisamjassim914@gmail.com
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The Challenges of Teaching Listening Comprehension

A B S T R A C T

This article investigates the challenges of learning to listen. Listening is one of the most important skills for language learners. Most of the time, language learners do listening in the classroom or lectures. The challenge for learners is to recognize the words in a stream of acoustic blur or normal conversational speech. This challenge is combined with the awareness of context, culture, discourse, community, and other sociolinguistic variables. This article will tackle the key issues and challenges in pedagogical research that are related to teaching listening comprehension as well as shedding light on the causes that make listening difficult for learners and suggest some solutions to handle such difficulties.

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تحديات تدريس الفهم السمعي

أ.م.د. ابتسام جاسم محمد / جامعة تكريت / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

الخلاصة:

تبحث هذه المقالة في تحديات تعلم الاستماع. الاستماع هو واحد من أهم المهارات لمتعلمي اللغة. في معظم الأحيان ، يستمع متعلمو اللغة في الفصل الدراسي أو المحاضرات. التحدي الذي يواجه المتعلمين هو التعرف على الكلمات في تيار من الضبابية الصوتية أو خطاب المحادثة العادي يتم الجمع بين هذا التحدي والوعي بالسياق والثقافة والخطاب والمجتمع والمتغيرات الاجتماعية اللغوية الأخرى تتناول هذه المقالة القضايا والتحديات الرئيسية في البحث التربوي المتعلقة بتدريس الفهم السمعي بالإضافة إلى إلقاء الضوء على الأسباب التي تجعل الاستماع صعباً على المتعلمين واقتراح بعض الحلول للتعامل مع هذه الصعوبات تتناول هذه المقالة القضايا والتحديات الرئيسية في البحث التربوي المتعلقة بتدريس الفهم

السمعي بالإضافة إلى إلقاء الضوء على الأسباب التي تجعل الاستماع صعبا على المتعلمين واقتراح بعض الحلول للتعامل مع هذه الصعوبات

Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Mastering listening in the first language is easy and can be achieved without effort , but it is difficult to master in the second language especially when English is taught in the foreign language . However, listening is considered as the hardest of the four skills, that is because it requires bottom-up processing and top-down processing . moreover the cognitive processes that are responsible for listening can't be taught through traditional methods . Also it is believed that most teachers are not aware about the serious difficulties and challenges of learning listening . This article will shed the light on the most popular difficulties and supply some solutions that may help teachers and students respectively.

2.2 Teaching Listening

Listening comprehension has focused on how the following three areas hinder successful listening comprehension .The first one, is the presence of top-down and bottom-up processes, second listening strategies that are applied to improve listening comprehension and cope with listening difficulties (Goh,2014,p.73), finally , the use of metacognition processes such as thinking .Successful listening involves integration of cognitive processes such as activating prior knowledge to be able to comprehend the

listening such as recognizing genre, topic ,participants ,register and so on. Researchers find out that neither bottom-up nor top-down processing is better than the other or worse than the other. Rather ,it was found out that integrating the two approaches for processing is most beneficial to students . That is students may need to pick up words or specific information in some cases and activate prior knowledge to understand the listening in other cases . Thus what seems to characterize successful listeners is their ability to apply top-down and bottom-up strategies depending on the listening demands.

2.3 The difficulties of listening

As mentioned before, mastering listening in L2 context is difficult and this because many causes such as the curricula which is mostly based towards other language skills than listening. Stephens (2011,p.312) states that problems facing students in listening can be classified into lower level and high-level problems. Lower level problems include recognizing sounds and words .High-level problems include recognizing and understanding rapid speech.According to Zenge(2007,p.12)the listening problems can be listed as :

- 1.speaking rate
- 2.Unable to recognize known words
- 3.New vocabulary
- 4,Sentence complexity
5. Background knowledge
- 6.Anxiety and frustration
- 7.Unfamiliar pronunciation .

Field and others like Renandya and Farrel 2011,have called teachers to pay more attention to lower level ,bottom-up processing problems. Field (2009.p.36)provides examples of how simple words and phrases often incorrectly perceived by L2 learners :*burst* may be heard as *birth* ,*invent* as *prevent*....etc.

Moreover, traditional methods to teaching listening skill mostly focused on top- down skills Atypical lesson may comprised the following stages:

1. A pre-listening stage to establish context and teach important vocabulary.
2. A listening stage that involved listening to a text ,completing comprehension questions and checking students` answers to these questions . These texts were a combination of authentic texts and simplified versions of authentic texts.
3. A post listening stage comprising, for example,a discussion of ideas from the text ,personal responses to the text summaries of the text.

In other words, the traditional classes become unsatisfactory, the instructions

were typically limited to tests comprehension ,also there is no systematic building of the processes that support listening . The problems of listening are the unique features of listening such as the rate of speech and the changes of sound in words that occur in the stream of speech .

2.4 Some appropriate suggestions to solve listening problems

Researchers and authors like Hulsijn(2001,p.232) suggest five principles that should be considered in listening lesson

1.Using familiar topics for listening that are familiar to students and from their daily

life ,for example, where they live or a day in school. Restricting the listening text to a very simple ,familiar genre . Here students are allowed to focus on the content instead of focusing on understanding the structure of the text.

2. Controlling the vocabulary ,here only the easy and frequent words are chosen .This allowed students to be more successful at identifying the keywords.

3. Using authentic –sounding speech ,here every effort is made to ensure that features characteristic of authentic ,natural spoken language are preserved .

4.Presenting listening exercises prioritize decoding ,in this step students are required to do four separate steps

a. listen carefully to the whole text and answer some comprehension questions. This is to familiarize themselves with the topic and rate of speech.

b. listen to a number of key utterances from the text and count the number of words

.This helps develop the word recognition skills.

c. listen to the same key utterances and complete a gap filling exercise and fill the number of missing keywords. This allows recognizing the key words which may undergo a phonetic modification such as assimilation.

d. students listen and read along with the text.

e. Students should listen to the text at least 2 times in the class, and unlimited times at home.

2.5 Some strategies to improve listening comprehension.

There are many strategies to improve listening comprehension such as :

1. Choose comprehensible input:

The most important thing to improve your listening skills is **to listen to material that you already mostly understand**. This kind of material, known as "comprehensible input", is any audio content that's slightly above current skill level. Everyone's level is slightly different, so this is hard to quantify in objective terms; It may seem counter-intuitive to listen to material that is just above your skill level, but it is extremely important. This is because if you listen to things that you mostly don't understand, you'll spend most of your time frustrated and confused. You may decipher a few words here and there, but you will struggle to piece together the gist of what is happening. Once students have that routine in place, they can then move on to more difficult activities that involve listening only, among other things.

2. Listen to what you enjoy

Understanding most of what you listen to is the fundamental step to improving your skills. Once you have that in place, you then need to decide exactly what kinds of comprehensible content you will practice with. While you technically could listen to anything that meets that 60%-80% comprehensibility standard, **you ideally want to choose materials that are relevant and interesting to you as a person**. This is important because relevant and interesting materials will always be more enjoyable to listen to compared to other resources. If you enjoy what you listen to, you will have more motivation to continue listening, and be more resistant to stopping, or losing focus. In real terms, this means that you should be very picky about what you do and do not use it as a listening resource. Just because your textbook has a lengthy audio dialogue about going to the airport or going shopping at the mall, you shouldn't feel obligated to listen to them. Be selective, and make sure that most of your practice time is spent with audio materials that you look forward to listening to and match up well with your goals and interests.

3. Focus on small details

Of all the major skills of language, listening skills require the most focus. This is because if you don't focus on what you're listening to, you may miss the core "message" that is being communicated.

To make matters worse, you can't usually "go back to the beginning" to recover information you've missed; most of the time, you'll have to make people repeat themselves, which can cost time and energy, and cause frustration. Even when you can "rewind" (e.g. with recorded audio) the exact information you missed can be hard to identify.

Because of all of this, it is paramount that you focus on "the big picture" when listening, and that you avoid getting distracted by small details.

When I say "big picture", I mean the gist, or general message of what you're listening to. If someone says to you "What kind of movies do you like?", you can get the gist merely by understanding the words "what", "movies" and "like", or even just "movies" and "like". Those two words can give you most of the key context of the sentence, even if you don't understand the five other words alongside them.

This is why listening to comprehensible input is so valuable. Even if you don't understand a word or two in something you hear, the words that you already know will often help you understand.

So don't give up if you don't understand the occasional word. Simply keep listening and focus on the "big picture" that you do understand to fill in any missing information.

4. Listen and re-listen to different speeds.

If beginner learners of any language can agree on one thing, it's this: language spoken at native speed is *fast*.

Native speakers speak so quickly and fluently that learners often don't have the time to mentally break down the sounds, words, and meaning of what they're hearing—and even if they do manage it, the native speaker is usually on a whole other topic by then.

be able to listen to native speakers at normal speed, you can't just dive in headfirst and listen at full speed right away. Speed, like vocabulary, plays a factor in comprehensible input. Because of this, you will likely need to listen at slower, more comprehensible speeds first, before you can gradually ramp things up to native speed. Now, there are a couple of ways to do this:

- When speaking to one or more native speakers, you can just politely ask them to slow down when they speak to you, or repeat certain details slowly.

- When listening to a recording, you can play it back at a variety of speeds,. The availability of playback options depends on which media player you are using, but free resources like YouTube, Audacity, and VLC media player all allow these kinds of speed adjustments. Of these options, the second is usually most convenient for learning. Simply take any audio file and adjust the playback speed until you can understand what is being said. Listen to it a few times at the slower speed, and then bump the speed up step by step until you reach native speed again.

5. Learn to take Notes

As learners, it is easy to view listening as an exclusively passive activity. Unlike speaking, reading, and writing, you don't really need to do anything at all to listen; you just need to be within earshot, and the sounds will enter your ears on their own.

The passive quality of listening is great for when you just want to sit back, relax, and listen to a piece of music or dialogue in a movie. It is not so great, however, for productive learning sessions. Learning happens best when it is active—when you, the learner, are engaged in what you are doing and take action to process new information. If learning is not active, you will absorb less information, and even run the risk of forgetting what you learned quickly.

To get the maximal value from your listening activities, you need to turn passive listening into active listening, which will greatly increase your comprehension and retention rates. One of the best ways to do this is through **taking notes while listening**.

When working on your listening skills, take out a notebook or piece of paper, and do the following:

- Write down the topic of the audio
- If there are multiple speakers, write down their names, or come up with labels for each (e.g. Speaker 1, Speaker 2)
- Write down the gist of what each speaker says, including any main points they try to communicate.
- If you frequently hear a word, you do not understand, try to write it down so you can look it up later
- If there's a word or sentence you find interesting, write it down so that you can practice using it in your own conversations.

- By listening and taking notes at the same time, you will be much more interested and engaged in the audio content, and, as a result, you will learn in a much more organized and efficient way.

6. Vary listening Routin

For any language learning routine to be successful, it needs to keep you interested. For long-term success, you need to be engaged in a variety of different activities that challenge you and make you want to keep learning, day after day.

Your listening routine, which is a vital part of your overall daily learning routine, should be frequently changed, mixed-up, and varied in much the same way.

Even if you like playing back language audio while sitting at your desk, don't do that all the time. Try to listen to your target language at other places and times as well.

This can include **listening while**:

- Reading a transcript of the audio
- Doing household chores
- You're commuting to and from work
- Exercising
- Listening to target language music

Test out as many variations of listening activities as you think of. When you've found a number that you like, you can then work them into your routine by rotating which activities you practice on certain days of the week.

7.Be patient.

Listening skills, like all good things, take time to grow and develop. They depend on a wide variety of factors (including time spent learning, amount of listening done, and depth of vocabulary), none of which can be accomplished through shortcuts.

The only way to improve your listening "quickly" is to be consistent. Practice every day, vary your materials, vary your activities, and interleave all those things throughout your routine.

If you can be consistent, and maintain such a routine for months, and years, you will find soon enough that your listening comprehension has grown exponentially. If you're not patient, and can't do that, your listening will grow at a much slower pace, if at all.

2.6 Pedagogical Recommendations

According to Richards (2009) ,Wilson (2003) Lynch(2009),and Vandergrift,etal(2012) There are several pedagogical recommendations to improve students` listening skills, these include

- 1.listening as a process: recently trend is to focus on the product and the process of listening, this would help students to experience processing problems at the perception,parsing and utilization stages of listening.
2. listening as comprehension and Acquisition: There is a need to consider listening from different perspectives and teachers can design listening activities that promote thenoticing of language functions like ,tenses, plural, nouns...etc.
- 3.More focused practice on problematic text features : Wilson (2003) has called teachers to give more attention to spoken text features such as assimilation that often cause problems.
- 4.Using authentic material : this will help students to improve their listening skills .
- 5.Greater attention to developing listening fluency : fluency refers to ones` ability to read and listen to text smoothly and effortlessly.

2.7 Conclusions

To have effective second language listening, teachers must have a clear understanding of learners` difficulties and sources of problems, so they need to direct their learning

materials and activities to engage their students in focused instruction targeting their specific problems in the classroom. Also, they need to design listening activities that involve their students in extensive listening outside the classroom and in real world use of listening skills for genuine communication . Furthermore, they need to foster their students` strategic competence in managing and controlling their learning process in and outside the classroom

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