

Developing Listening

Sulabha Natraj

“If you listen carefully, at the end you’ll be someone else.”

The Mahabharata

Introduction

This article considers the place of listening in language learning, and further, illustrates a few sample tasks to develop listening skills.

Listening and language development

- a. Listening is the **primary language ability** out of which all the other develop. It is only through listening first that individuals recognize the patterns in language which, in turn, leads to internalization of language. Children provide evidence of their linguistic competence first not by means of speech or gesture, but through understanding of oral language. Adequate internalization of a linguistic system leads to production of language bits. Thus, listening is the **basis** of the whole process of language development.
- b. Through selective, evaluative and interpretative listening one is able to **organize knowledge**, which is a pre-requisite for generating new ideas and imaginative thoughts. Generating and selecting ideas and churning thereof are processes indispensable in creativity. Thus, developing appropriate listening habits alone can **develop appropriate tools for thinking and reflection**.
- c. Listening is the focus, or, **first purpose for all speech activity**. Except for almost a purely expressive utterance, speaking implies a listener. However, listening can become a **linguistic and social reality only when the speech code is understood**. Even when we are engaged in merely listening, we seem to be passive, we actually act : react or respond verbally, follow instructions, relate information with our repertoire of previous knowledge, compare and evaluate, take decisions or form opinions. This is as complex and demanding as any other language skill, although this is not manifest directly, immediately unless a physical response from the listener follows.

What is listening?

Listening is a complex of skills. At various levels of linguistic and cognitive competence, it refers to various sub-skills. Listening implies

- hearing of sounds – ideas, facts, arguments, as they appear;
- identifying the intended meaning;
- integrating what is heard with one’s repertoire of experience;
- juxtaposing the old information against the new and comparing the two;
- interpreting the data, deriving inferences;

- arriving at a decision, forming an opinion, quantum leaping in terms of ideas or creative organization thereof.

Thus, listening means interpreting a text in a specific context by assigning, meaning to the sounds heard.

Further, human beings have a hierarchy of needs for listening. We listen for information, to evaluate or to enjoy. Discriminative listening, which is the basic function of this skill, refers to understanding, remembering and comprehending the integral parts of a concept presented. This requires cognitive abilities to restructure what has been said into categories of knowledge, for example, listening to instructions of the trainer while learning to drive a car, or following the instructions of the partner while fixing a shelf on the wall. Evaluative listening refers to the process of conceptualization, understanding and making a critical judgment concerning the value of an idea. Listening to the salesman and arriving at a decision about whether to buy a product or not falls in this category. Appreciative listening does not aim at challenging an idea/opinion or remembering data. It is simply to enjoy and appreciate. Listening to musical performances, singing of birds, cooing of babies by their parents are instances in this category.

The Lacunae

Despite its well recognized significant role in effective communication and the overall language development process, listening seems to be taken for granted. Lack of adequate skills in listening continues to be a major problem throughout the educational system, even at the tertiary level.

One single reason for inadequate development of this skill in learners is **neglect**. Any teacher of language would readily agree that among the basic language skills (LSRW), listening is hardly 'taught' or paid special attention to. Like reading, listening is a skill of reception. Thus, it is an unobservable, covert skill. Listening seems to have been further relegated to passivity through neglect. This may be because the text is not 'seen', it is not 'there' in front of the listener. He listener does not seem to be 'doing' anything. Listening is perceived to be a result of chance occurrences. Contrary to this, listening involves attention and understanding that can be developed through disciplined training.

Failure to develop this skill can further be ascribed to the nature of **listening done in ESL classrooms**. The models of spoken language that the learners are exposed to are artificial, laborious and limited. The teacher is extremely conscious about clarity in pronunciation, which is not the case in a natural flow of language. Because the teacher puts in too much effort to be clear to the students, the spoken language in the classroom sounds to be laborious. Further, most students listen only to their teacher's language alone. Thus, their exposure is limited to only a couple of models of spoken English. These language bits, moreover, are regarding the content that is being discussed. So, it is highly pedantic and bookish. Much of the language used in the classroom is formal, impersonal, too.

The exposure to peer-talk is almost negligible. In terms of variety, the themes and situation in which listening takes place, in the classroom are limited, occurring mainly in the form of

question – answer and other forms of teacher controlled discussions based on the prescribed course books.

What can we do?

If the ability to understand spoken language does not develop naturally it ought to be taught. Teachers of English need to create **real speaker – listener contexts** in the classroom wherein learners listen with a **purpose** as they are called upon to do in real life, situations. By creating an awareness of the sub-skills involved in listening, interest in and readiness for the task on hand and by providing adequate exposure to the language, the learners can be helped to be receptive to the spoken form. In fact, learners who are provided with appropriate listening tasks do give evidence that they are alert to what is going on, that they are focusing their attention on the event, that they are concerned with the purpose, and hence the outcome, of the task. Through disciplined ear-training, right from the initial years, listening skills can be developed adequately.

Some Sample Tasks

- a. Ear-training can begin with exercises on **identifying sounds** of different types in order to help learners recognise sounds from noise. Learners can be made to listen to sounds at home (scrubbing, dripping of a tap, whistle from cooker, sweeping of the floor with a broom etc.) Later, they can be made to listen to sounds from different places (playground, temple/church, railway station, restaurant etc) and asked to identify the source of the sounds. This kind of ear-training during the initial years helps learners to concentrate on the event, and later, learn to listen to the material critically.
- b. **Dictation** as a language teaching activity does not seem to be a fashionable classroom activity any more. However, it can be very useful to develop skills of listening. Dictation can be given in many varied ways, with numerous types of language materials. Beginning with **minimal pairs, short sentences, messages, notes, telegrams, instructions, announcements, jingles, etc.**, dictation can be given of longer language chunks like **songs** and **passages**.

Practice in intonation patterns can be provided by asking learners to identify the intended message of a short utterance said in varying intonation. The following sentences can imply different language functions depending on the intonation used.

It's not far.

It's not today.

Don't forget.

Sorry.

Where to?

I hope so.

Graffiti as material for dictation can add fun to language classes. **Catchy slogans, quotes**, even tongue twisters with recurring sound patterns can also add to interest in the otherwise common place activity.

- Keep the city clean. *Throw away all the tourists.*
-

- If you convinced me and I convinced you, would there not still be two points of view!
- The ant has made himself illustrious through constant industry industrious.
- If you understand, tell me that you understand. If you don't understand, tell me that you don't understand. If you don't understand, yet don't tell me that you don't understand, how will I understand that you don't understand? Understand?

Materials for dictation can be selected or prepared keeping in view not only thematic variety but also the *modus operandi*. Here are two sample activities for dictation with specific focus on ear-training.

Do Not Correct Me

Having selected a passage suitable for dictation, the teacher underlines a few words. These are the words that the teacher is going to pronounce wrongly. Selection of these words should be done carefully keeping in view phonetic similarities between the words dictated and their correct counterparts. Minimal pairs like 'buy-pie' can be thought of. The teacher instructs the students to write the passage 'as they hear'. Students tend to write the 'correct' words even in place of the words pronounced wrongly. Those with a higher linguistic competence tend to commit this error more frequently than those with a relatively poorer competence. Here is an example.

Last Sunday we **witnessed** an interesting cricket **batch**. The stadium was **fool**. There was not even a single **sit** vacant. The **empire** called the captains. The captain of the **patting** team **heat** a century. The crowd **jeered**.

(Key : witnessed, match, full, seat, umpire, batting, hit, cheered).

Let's Come Together

This is a peer-dictation activity to be carried out in pairs. The material for dictation could be an anecdote or a story, with two versions. Version A, to be given to peer A, has a few parts missing from the story. These could be words or parts of sentences. Version B, to be given to peer B, has these missing bits. But it does not have what version A includes. Only when the two versions are put together the whole story can be formed. Now, peer A gives dictation of what s/he has to peer B. while B writes, s/he needs to think of the syntax of the sentences and coherence in the passage. Later, B gives dictation of his version to A. Thus, ideally both the partners should have the complete story. However, if this does not happen, the pair may read out the story, putting the two passages together. Here is

an example.

[A]

A man began to give _____ had been told that the stuff _____, _____, _____ he would hold the head _____ his knees, force its jaws open _____ down its throat. _____ broke loose and spilt the oil _____. _____, it returns to lick the spoon. That is _____ what the dog had been _____ was not the _____ his method of _____.

[B]

_____ large doses of cod-liver oil to his Dobberman because he _____ was good for dogs. Each day _____ of the protesting dog between _____ and pour the liquid _____. One day the dog _____ on the floor. Then, to the man's great surprise, _____ when he discovered that _____ fighting oil but _____ administering it.

Tasks based on Information transfer, wherein learners present the information in a form different from the one dictated to them offer a wide range of materials to choose from. Learners may, for instance, fill in information in different kinds of **columns, charts, schedules and time-tables**. Or, they may listen to descriptions of places and follow a route on a **map**, or a picture of a village. Alternatively, they may write **labels** for buildings in the picture. **Captions** or **dialogues** can as well be given for dictation which the learners fill in appropriate boxes and bubbles. They could be made to listen to a variety of **announcements** heard at public places.

Listen to the announcements and fill in the information in suitable columns.

| 1 Sr.No. | 2 Train No. | 3 Time : Arrival | 4 Time : Departure | 5 Platform No. | 6 Remarks |
|-------------|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| | | | | | |
| | | | | | |

- 2002 Ahimsa Express is about to arrive at platform No. 4 Bogie S2 will be 5th from the engine.
- 9119 Samta Express is reported to be running late by 2 hours. Passengers please take note of this.

3. The train at platform No. 4 is the Minar Queen. It is scheduled to leave at 18.30 hours. Passengers are requested to take their seats.
4. Due to certain unforeseen circumstances, train No. 4020 Narayan passenger has been cancelled today. Instead, two bogies have been added to the Intercity Express. The intercity is reported to be running at the scheduled time i.e. 14.0 hours.

Alternately, students could be made to listen to announcements by various agencies. Then, they could be asked to identify the place and occasion where each of these announcements is likely to be heard.

1. Children and elders, listen carefully. Listen one and all. The venue for the circus has been changed from the Azad Chawk to the Rustamji Maidan.
2. This is the last and final call for the participants in the sack race. Participants are requested to report at the starting line.
3. Complementary passes for the circus will be available in the office between 2 and 3 today. You are requested to bring you library card without which no one will be given the pass.

Students could be asked to **match pictures with their descriptions** read aloud by the teacher. These pictures could be of places, persons or objects.

Listen and Draw is yet another sort of information transfer task. The learners draw what they hear. Here is an example.

You're going to create a farm. Draw a square of the measure of 6" by 6". Give labels to the directions namely East, West, North, South. Place a gate in the centre of the eastern border. Write the name of your farm at the gate. Now, let's take a round around the farm. All along the southern border, from East to West, there are mango trees. So, the whole of the southern side is shady. In the centre of these shady trees, along the southern border, there are two swings and a bench. There is a well in the centre of the farm. All along the Northern and Western borders, sugar cane has been planted. It is ready for harvest. The sugar cane plantation can be seen from the centre, where there is the well, up to the on both the Northern and Western borders. Between the well and the gate, there are some flowerbeds. There are colourful flowers, too.

As learners progress in the development of listening skills, they can be presented with more challenging tasks based on comprehension, analysis and synthesis of information. The tasks may involve critical, evaluative listening.

What does the magician have?

Essentially an exercise in listening comprehension, this task aims at developing concentration and critical listening. Students are told to list the things. The magician has in the beginning and at the end of the show.

A magician came to our school. He had a big iron box with him. He opened it and took out three small sticks from it. He called one boy and asked him to close his eyes. Then he placed one stick in the boy's hand. As soon as the boy opened his eyes, he found a scarf in place of the stick. The magician presented that scarf to the boy. Then, the magician took out many things from his box and placed them on a table. They were 3 bottles, 2 balls, 4 colourful ribbons and 6 bulbs. The box was empty. The magician took the ribbon and swirled them very fast. The ribbons turned into long pencils. Every one was surprised. The magician blew a whistle. The pencils turned into ribbons once again. He presented one ribbon to a little girl in the front row. Then he showed us tricks with the bottles, balls and rings. He taught us tricks with rings. He gifted the rings to our school. Later he placed all his things in the box and thanked us. We cheered and clapped.

Cloze listening is yet another way of helping learners develop their listening ability. One of the types of cloze listening is **patch work listening** wherein learners listen to a story or a passage with a few parts missing. Later, they work in pairs or groups to construct the whole. Later, when they are ready with their versions of the whole, they listen to the original, complete version and compare their story with the original.

At an advanced level, learners could be given numerous versions of a story, e.g. a hearing of a case of murder or theft wherein a number of witnesses appear at the courtroom and report what they think has happened learners listen to all the reports and arrive at a conclusion. This kind of **jig-saw listening** develops skills of evaluative listening.

Traditional exercises for listening comprehension based on stories followed by objective type of tests can be undertaken as well.

ESL learners ought to be exposed to samples of good speeches, skits, recitation. This is to help them enjoy listening to such materials and **appreciate** the style of presentation.

Are You Listening?

Listening is a vital function in oral communication. Whether listening is or is not the most important of the four language skills, the fact remains that we do more of it than any of the others. Hence, it merits more attention than it has received. Developing listening skills is a matter of focus in ESL teaching today. The need is too make available to the teachers materials for the purpose. These materials, as suggested in this paper, ought to go beyond the common place dictation exercises.

Materials chosen for developing listening should be more than a mere communication of information and should involve the learner imaginatively with what is heard. "It **shows** rather than simply **telling**..... the receiver goes beyond comprehension of the basic meaning of what is heard, in order to engage with the communicative intention....." (Jeremy Hunter and John McRae, 1991.)

If enough emphasis is not placed on the receptive skills, and if instead, the productive skills are emphasized all the time, students can soon run out of depth. Lack of ideas to communicate and the requisite skill to convey one's thoughts effectively, may make learners feel insecure and diffident this can have far reaching negative effect on their self-esteem. Regular listening practice, like reading, can provide learners with a rich input of language. This can form the repertoire to draw from for the use of the productive skills.

“Man has two ears and one mouth so that he can hear twice as much as he speaks”

References:

1. Brown Gillian & Yule George Teaching the Spoken Language, CUP, 1983.
2. Byrne, Donn, Teaching Oral English, Longmann, 1984.
3. Cornwell, Clifton & Gibson, James Creative Speech Communication, Macmillan, 1983.
4. Darntor, Peter, Audio Techniques in Training, Training Technology Programme Vol. 9, Parthenon Publishing, 1987.
5. Gray and Wise, The Bases of Speech, Harper & Row Publishers, 1959.
6. Holden, Susan (ed) Selected Selections from Modern English Teacher, Longman, 1983.
7. Hunter, Jeremy & McRae John Talking Texts, School & School days, Penguin English, 1991.
8. Morley, John, Listening and Language Learning in ESL, Harcourt Brace Jovanovleh INC, 1984.
9. Netor, Anne et al. Are you Listening? English Language Programs Division, USIA, 1985.