

ESP Listening Comprehension for IT-Students as a Language Skill

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Abstract: A problem of ESP Listening Comprehension for IT-students as a Language Skill is reviewed in this article. Here are proposed some techniques to develop effective ESP listening comprehension skills for IT-students. The format of this technology (Pre-listening Stage with recommended pre-listening activities included; While-Listening Stage with its activities and specific cares; After-listening Stage and recommended after-listening activities); categories of spoken texts (static, dynamic and abstract) have been considered in the given abstract in details.

Key words: Stage • Listening comprehension skills • IT-students • Activities • Texts • Teacher

INTRODUCTION

Language came into life as a means of communication. It exists and is alive only through the speech. When we speak about teaching a foreign language, we first of all have in mind teaching it as a means of communication.

Speech is a bilateral process. It includes hearing, on the one hand and speaking, on the other. When we say “hearing” we mean auding or listening comprehension.

What is listening? Listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary and grasping his meaning [1]. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously. J. Willis [2] lists a series of micro-skills of listening, which she calls enabling skills. They are: predicting what people are going to talk about, guessing at unknown words or phrases without panicking, using one's own knowledge of the subject to help one understand, identifying relevant points, rejecting irrelevant information, retaining relevant points (note-taking, summarizing), recognizing discourse markers, recognizing cohesive devices, understanding different intonation patterns and uses of stress, which give clues to meaning and social setting, understanding inferred information [2].

Listening is a skill in a sense that it's a related but distinct process than hearing which involves merely perceiving sound in a passive way while listening occupies an active and immediate analysis of the streams of sounds [3].

Tomatis' (1983) view is, while listening; the desire to listen, as well as the capability to listen (comprehension) must be present with the listener for the successful recognition and analysis of the sound [3].

This correlation is like that between seeing and reading. Seeing is a very ordinary and passive state while reading is a focused process requiring reader's instrumental approach. Listening has a “volitional component” (Tomatis' definition) [3].

What “listening” really means is listening and understanding what we hear at the same time. So, two concurrent actions are demanded to take place in this process. Besides, according to Mecheal Rost [4], listening comprises some component skills which are: discriminating between sounds, recognizing words, identifying grammatical groupings of words, identifying expressions and sets of utterances that act to create meaning, connecting linguistic cues to non-linguistic and paralinguistic cues, using background knowledge to predict and later to confirm meaning and recalling important words and ideas.

As McDonough and Shaw [5] explain that a listener as a processor of language has to go through three processes using three types of skills:

- Processing sound/Perception skills (As the complete perception doesn't emerge from only the source of sound, listeners segment the stream of sound and detect word boundaries, contracted forms, vocabulary, sentence and clause boundaries, stress on longer words and effect on the rest of the words, the significance of intonation and other language-

related features, changes in pitch, tone and speed of delivery, word order pattern, grammatical word classes, key words, basic syntactic patterns, cohesive devices etc) [5].

- Processing meaning/Analysis skills (It's a very important stage in the sense, as researches show, that syntax is lost to memory within a very short time whereas meaning is retained for much longer. J.C. Richards (1983) says that, "memory works with propositions, not with sentences". While listening, listeners categorize the received speech into meaningful sections, identify redundant material, keep hold of chunks of the sentences, think ahead and use language data to anticipate what a speaker may be going to say, accumulate information in the memory by organizing them and avoid too much immediate detail [5, 6].
- Processing knowledge and context/Synthesis skills (Here, „context” refers to physical setting, the number of listener and speakers, their roles and their relationship to each other while “linguistic knowledge” refers to their knowledge of the target language brought to the listening experience. Every context has its individual frame of reference, social attitude and topics. So, members of a particular culture have particular rules of spoken behavior and particular topic which instigate particular understanding. Listening is thought as “interplay” between language and brain which requires the “activation of contextual information and previous knowledge” where listeners guess, organize and confirm meaning from the context [5].

However, none of these micro-skills is either used or effective in isolation or is called listening. Successful listening refers to “the integration of these component skills” and listening is nothing but the “coordination of the component skills” (C.A.J. Aarnoutse, K.P. Von Den

Bos and Brand-Grewel [7], S. Brand-Gruwel, C.A.J. Aarnoutse and K.P. Von Den Bos [8], C. Chaudron [9], I.A. Diakidoy, P. Stylianou, C. Karefillidou and P. Papageorgiou [10], D. Mendelsohn [11], J. Morley [12], I. Thompson and J. Rubin [13] etc.).

In teaching IT-students ESP listening comprehension we must be careful not to go to extremes, either by being concerned too exclusively with theories without thinking about their application to teaching, or by opening the textbook and explaining new words, playing the tape recorder and asking/answering questions.

It is essential for a teacher to have an overall understanding of what listening is and why it is difficult for IT-students and what some solutions may be.

The vital question is how to bridge the gap between an analysis of listening and actual classroom teaching.

Teaching IT-students listening requires a bit more on the part of the teacher than that of the learners. One of the main principle of teaching IT-students listening is language material which intended to be used for training listening comprehension and never be presented visually first.

Good listening lessons go beyond the main listening task itself with related activities before and after the listening.

The format for IT-students may be like the following:

- Pre-listening Stage: Some activities before listening may serve as preparation or warm-up for listening in several ways.

These function as “reference” and “framework” by giving prior knowledge of listening activities.

Some recommended per-listening activities include (Table 1) [14]:

Table 1: Typology of Activities for a Listening Lesson

Stages	Activities	Explanation/Demonstration
Pre-Listening	Warm-up exercises:	
	1. Elicitation/discussion about the topic (perhaps based on visuals, title)	a) to elicit something associated with the topic b) to encourage students to exchange ideas/opinions about the topic
	2. Brainstorming	a) word-star: ask students to predict the words and expressions likely to appear in the passage. Teacher writes them on the blackboard. b) expressing hypotheses about the content of the passage, based on previous knowledge, by writing notes down
	3. Games	a) for warming up relaxation b) for training in basic listening skills, e.g. miming words and expressions heard; minimal-pair distinction
	4. Guiding questions	a) teacher asks/writes questions that help students exploit passages

Table 2: Typology of Activities for a Listening Lesson

Stages	Activities	Explanation/Demonstration
While-Listening	1. Comparing	to compare passage with prediction in pre-listening
	2. Obeying instructions	students are given instructions and show comprehension by physical movement, finishing a task, etc.
	3. Filling in gaps	e.g., students hear the utterances of only one of the participants and are asked to reconstruct those of the others
	4. Repetition	students are asked to repeat short phrases or complete utterances recorded
	5. Detecting differences or mistakes	students listen to passages, responding only when they come across something different
	6. Ticking off items (bingo)	students listen to a list of words and tick off or categorize them as they hear them
	7. Information transfer	maps, plans, grids, forms, lists, pictures, etc
	8. Paraphrase	students are asked to focus on certain sentences and paraphrase them
	9. Sequencing	e.g., students are asked to give the right order for a series of pictures
	10. Information search	students listen to a passage and take notes on the segments that answer a particular question
	11. Filling in blanks	students are given the transcript of a passage with some words missing and must fill in the blanks while listening
	12. Matching	e.g., students are asked to match items that have the same meaning as those they hear

- While-Listening Stage: activities in this stage must follow the learners' specific needs, instructional goal, listening purposes and learners' proficiency level.

While listening activities directly relate to the text and listeners are asked to do these during or immediately after listening.

Some specific cares are required in designing while-listening activities (Table 2) [14].

Listening activities here become varied according to their purposes and objectives. Four major distinctions include Attentive listening, Extensive listening, Intensive listening, Selective listening and Interactive listening [15].

Attentive Listening: Both of the ideas are true that attentiveness is a prior condition for understanding and listener often lapse attention for various reasons.

Losing interest, inability to keep up with, losing track of goals, less confident are some of them. Teacher can help the listeners to hold their attention by personalizing the material, using the target language while talking to them to keep flow and lessening their stress and motivating by asking oral responses repeatedly. Activities in this stage would be interesting and easy including face to face interaction, using visual and tangible topics, clear description of the listening procedure, minimum use of written language and immediate and ongoing responses etc so that learners can easily keep pace with the text and activity.

Listening to short chunks, music image, personal stories, teacher-talk, small question- answer and interview etc may be applied in this stage [15].

Extensive Listening: This type of listening has also a greater ease than other types as it is concerned to promote overall comprehension of a text and never

requires learners to follow every word and understand them. Learners need to comprehend the text as a whole which is called global understanding. Activities in this section must be chosen in terms with the proficiency level of the listeners.

At the lower level they may have problems to organize the information, so some non-verbal forms in responding might be given such as putting pictures in a right sequence, following directions on a map, checking of items in a photograph, completing a grid, chart or timetable etc.

At the developed stage, some language based tasks requiring constructing meaning, inferring decisions, interpreting text and understanding gist are usually recommended. Completing cloze exercises or giving one or two word answers, multiple choices, predicting the next utterances, forming connected sets of notes, inferring opinions, or interpreting parts of the text are some samples [15].

Intensive Listening: "Hearing clearly" is also a prime aspect of listening as it includes accurate perception without which the second phase of processing meaning becomes very difficult. Listening intensively is quite important to understand the language form of the text as we have to understand both the lexical and grammatical units that lead to form meaning. So, intensive listening requires attention to specific items of language, sound or factual detail such as words, phrase, grammatical units, pragmatic units, sound changes (vowel reduction and consonant assimilation), stress, intonation and pauses etc. Feedback on accuracy and repetition on the teacher's part promote success here.

Paraphrasing, remembering specific words and sequences, filling gaps with missing words, identifying numbers and letters, picking out particular facts,

Table 3: Typology of Activities for a Listening Lesson

Stages	Activities	Explanation/Demonstration
After-Listening	1. Answering to show comprehension of messages	e.g., multiple-choice or true/false questions
	2. Problem solving	students hear all the information relevant to a particular problem and then set themselves to solve it
	3. Summarizing	students are given several possible summary-sentence and asked to say which of them fits a recorded text
	4. Jigsaw listening	different groups of students listen to different but connected passages, each of which supplies some part of what they need to know. Then they come together to exchange information in order to complete a story or perform a task
	5. Writing as a follow-up to listening activities	e.g., letters, telegrams, postcards, messages, etc., related to passages
	6. Speaking as follow-up to listening activities	.g., debate, interview, discussion, role-play, dramatization, etc., associated with the passages heard

discriminating the pronunciation of same phoneme in different positions, replacing words, finding stress and boundaries are some good intensive listening practice [15].

Selective Listening: It involves listening to selected part of a text, as its name suggests, to predict information and select „cues” surrounding information.

Thus, the listeners may have an assessment of their development in listening to authentic language. Here the focus is on the main parts of the discourse and by noticing these parts listener construct their understanding of the meaning of whole of the text through inferring. As the expectation on understanding is focused and has a purpose, in these activities, listeners have the chance of second listening to check understanding and have feedback repeatedly.

Listening to sound sequences, documentary, story maps, incomplete monologues, conversation cues and topic listening are examples of selective listening [15].

Interactive Listening: This is a very advanced stage of listening practice as it implies social interaction in small groups which is a „true test” of listening.

In interactive listening, learners, either in pairs or in groups, receive new information, identify them continuously. Besides, they have to work out the problems of understanding each other and formulate responses immediately as we are required to do in real life. So, in spite of calling „practice”, this goes beyond of it. As this phase involves both comprehension and production, it directly promotes speaking skill. Teachers have a central role in this stage. They have to set up specific goals so that learners can assess their own performance, observe learners’ language in order to provide immediate feedback on their interaction strategies.

Group survey, self introductions, short speeches, chatting and discussing, exchanging news and views, interviewing and being interviewed etc. might be appropriate here [15].

- After-listening Stage: post listening activities can be used to check comprehension, evaluate listening skill, use of listening strategies and use the knowledge gained to other contexts. So, these are called listening exercises at all and defined as „follow-up works”.

The features of these activities are: a) related to pre-listening activities, such as predicting; b) may create a real life situation where students might be asked to use knowledge gained through listening; c) may extend the topic and help the students remember new vocabulary [15].

Some recommended after-listening activities include (Table 3) [14]:

- So, it is true that natural speech is hard to grade and it is difficult for students to identify the different voices and cope with frequent overlaps. Nevertheless, the materials should progress step by step from semi-authenticity that displays most of the linguistic features of natural speech to total authenticity, because the final aim is to understand natural speech in real life.

To fulfill effective listening a teacher should apply for:

- grade listening materials according to the students’ level and provide authentic materials rather than idealized, filtered samples;

		STATIC		DYNAMIC ABSTRACT	
		Description	Description/Instruction	Storytelling	Opinion-expressing
↑ Less Difficult					
	few elements which may be difficult to distinguish				
↓ More difficult					
	many elements which may be difficult to distinguish				

(adapted from Brown and Yule, 1983: 107)

Fig. 1: Caption Missing

- design task-oriented exercises to engage the students' interest and help them learn listening skills subconsciously.
- provide students with different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, interviews, storytelling, English songs and so on;
- try to find visual aids or draw pictures and diagrams associated with the listening topics to help students guess or imagine actively.

Brown and Yule (1983) categorize spoken texts into three broad types: static, dynamic and abstract (Figure 1) [16].

Texts that describe objects or give instructions are static texts; those that tell a story or recount an incident are dynamic texts; those that focus on someone's ideas and beliefs rather than on concrete objects are abstract texts.

Brown and Yule [16] suggest that the three types of input should be provided according to the difficulties they present and the students' level. They Figure 1 shown below, in which difficulty increases from left to right and, within any one type of input, complexity increases from top to bottom.

Here we propose some of the following techniques to develop effective ESP listening comprehension skills for IT-students [17].

- At the beginning of a reading lesson or dialog, having already introduced key vocabulary words, slowly read the text aloud to your students before having them open their books. Then ask general comprehension questions. At the end of the reading lesson, dialogue or follow-up review exercise,

read the text again, this time at normal speed. The students should not be allowed to read along; they should concentrate on listening.

- Give frequent short dictations.
- When doing drills or question-and-answer exercises, have students cue one another whenever possible. This forces them to listen to each other and get used to different accents.
- Direct students work in pairs and groups so that they can listen and respond to one another on a more personal level.
- When practicing dialogues or role-playing, occasionally have pairs of students stand back-to-back so that they must understand each other without the aid of non-verbal cues.
- Invite a guest speaker to be interviewed in class so that the students can hear other accents and intonations. Before allowing the students to interview the speaker, prime the class by discussing the kinds of questions they will ask. By practicing the questions beforehand, students will be less embarrassed about asking questions or making mistakes.
- Give the students the opportunity to listen to different examples of spoken English through music, games, movies, CDs, Internet, etc.

At the conclusions we'd like to say that it is important to maintain an interactive and communicative approach for teaching ESP listening comprehension, because it is such a required skill for IT-students.

When designing lessons and teaching materials to further develop ESP listening comprehension skills, IT-students, first of all, need to be motivated and stay motivated. This is best accomplished by determining:

the suitability of the listening materials, the techniques used in classroom teaching and the use of authentic materials, reasons for getting IT-students to listen in English, the kind of listening that teachers use in classroom, factors that make listening difficult, types of classroom listening materials, listening for communicative tasks, listening for general understanding, listening for details and writing a script dictations.

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