

Listening: a challenging skill to teach

La destreza oral: un reto para la enseñanza

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Abstract

This scientific paper presents a revision of some articles and studies related to the teaching and learning of the listening skill in a foreign language (Gakonga, 2015; Goh, 1999; Richards, 2008; Sternberg, Sternberg, & Mio, 2012; Ur, 1996). Throughout the sections, the author aims to support the idea that although this skill is challenging for both teachers and students, it is possible to plan, monitor, and evaluate its development provided that three aspects are taken into account: the complexity of the skill, teachers' demanding role, and students' active role. The first section describes what it is involved in the listening process. The section mainly addresses students' internal factors that learners use to deal with the task and succeed in it. The second section is a revision of what teachers can do to improve their teaching. This section gives ideas to help learners overcome the difficulties mentioned in the previous section. Finally, the third section illustrates what activities teachers could prepare for the pre, while and post listening stages to encourage students to take an active role in their own learning process. All in all, this paper intends to raise teachers' concern about the challenges students face when working on the listening skill as well as what educators can do to facilitate the teaching and learning process of this skill.

Key words: listening skill, Anderson model, working memory, cognitive and metacognitive tasks.

Resumen

El presente artículo científico presenta una revisión de algunos artículos y estudios relacionados con la enseñanza y aprendizaje de la habilidad de escucha de un idioma extranjero (Gakonga, 2015; Goh, 1999; Richards, 2008; Sternberg, Sternberg, & Mio, 2012;

Ur, 1996). A través de las distintas secciones, se espera justificar la idea de que, aunque esta habilidad representa un reto tanto para profesores como para estudiantes, es posible planificar, monitorear y evaluar su desarrollo si se consideran tres aspectos: la complejidad propia de la habilidad de escucha, el rol esencial del docente y el rol activo del estudiante. La primera sección describe el proceso de escucha. Esta sección se enfoca principalmente en los factores internos que los estudiantes usan para realizar las tareas de escucha con éxito. La segunda sección da sugerencias sobre lo que los profesores pueden hacer para mejorar sus estrategias de enseñanza. La sección incluye ideas para superar las dificultades mencionadas en la sección anterior. Finalmente, la tercera sección ilustra las actividades que los docentes pueden preparar antes, durante y después de las tareas de escucha para que los estudiantes tomen un rol activo en el proceso. Este artículo intenta concientizar a los profesores acerca de los desafíos a los que los estudiantes se enfrentan, así como lo que ellos pueden hacer como educadores para facilitar el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de la habilidad de escucha en una lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: habilidad de escucha, Modelo Anderson, memoria de trabajo, tareas cognitivas y tareas metacognitivas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Some EFL learners have experienced that the listening skill have been the least practiced skill in their classrooms and that understanding spoken speech in real life interactions is quite hard. These students might devote their time on practising grammar and reading, learning vocabulary, doing writing and speaking activities, and listening to teachers' instructions and explanations sometimes in English, other times in their L1. However, this approach does not benefit students when they have to deal with an evaluation or interact in an English conversation since they have to be ready for the listening section in the former and for understanding and reacting to the message in the later. This learning scenario does not follow the prevailing trends in listening instruction.

Fortunately, there exist many EFL teachers that provide students with a more meaningful learning experience because they have realized what is required to teach this skill. From my point of view, understanding what we are to teach is the first step to leave behind misconceptions and improve our teaching practice. Therefore, this scientific essay aims to describe why I believe there are at least three main reasons to understand listening as a challenging skill to teach.

2. THE COMPLEXITY OF THE LISTENING SKILL

First of all, it is essential to recognize the complexity of the listening skill since teaching it is not that simple as playing the recorded texts and then asking students to pay attention to master the skill. On the contrary, there are relevant theories about how EFL learners perceive and understand acoustic input and how they develop their listening abilities. Thus, teachers are meant to know the listening process before preparing the lessons because listening involves a complex cognitive process inside our brains and memory systems.

When we listen to spoken messages our memory is actually encoding the input to make coherent mental representations by connecting with our previous knowledge and the new input. The perception, parsing and utilisation processing of information that keeps coming is called the listening comprehension process or Anderson's model. Native speakers automatize these phases, but when students learn a foreign language, they need to become skilful in the process since if one stage fails, the understanding of the whole message is compromised. As a result, in order to assist learners, teachers should know not only what students' brains are supposed to be doing, but also what difficulties they might be facing in each phase.

Goh's study (1999) of 40 undergraduate students' listening diaries provides insights on the ten most common listening comprehension challenges learners struggle with in each of the three phases of Anderson's model. In the perceptual phase, students struggle to recognize words and sounds in connected speech, and they work hard to keep focused on the spoken text by managing internal and external distractions. Then, in the parsing stage, their working memory try to make sense of what was and what is being heard to establish connections between the new information and the previous knowledge. In other words, their working memory control the flow of input that goes to and comes from the long-term memory. Finally, when the message is stored in the long-term memory, our students' brain has completed the utilisation phase.

As it has been described, the listening skill is not a passive skill, but a very complex one. Unfortunately, as Goh points out teachers cannot observe these internal processes that take place inside our students' brains in order to help them overcome any problem. Nevertheless, I am inclined to believe we can do something better than just telling them to "pay more attention and keep on listening".

3. TEACHING THE LISTENING SKILL: A DEMANDING TASK

Another reason to consider listening as a challenging skill to teach is that it is not only a complex process by itself and for students, but it is also a demanding activity for teachers. English teachers must do a lot more than only playing the recording and asking questions about a conversation. They have to take some actions to maximize students' opportunities to develop their listening skills. Even though the measures might be overwhelming, they are actually necessary for the efficiency of our teaching practice. Those actions can be summarized in two words: planning and assessing.

Considering the listening problems students reported in Goh's study (1999), it seems that the three main problems students face when listening to recordings are recalling the input they have just heard, recognising the words from that input, and understanding the message. In other words, our students usually need support in all the levels of the listening comprehension model. Hence, it is our challenge to do something to guide them to deal with these issues. I have identified three points that, to my mind, we can be constantly planning and assessing.

Firstly, we should do something regarding learners' tendency to quickly forget the new input they hear. Goh thinks this might happen because the short-term memory is overloaded for either too demanding or too unfamiliar input. Therefore, we can devote time assessing the suitability of the listening material, both written and spoken text, according to our students' needs and interests. The main goal of this point is to determine if the texts are appropriate for our learners' level because this fact would influence their cognitive process while listening. Krashen's concept of comprehensible input ($i + 1$) rule is very useful because it suggests working with materials that are neither too easy nor too difficult, but challenging. Furthermore, we can aid the working memory processes by activating students' prior knowledge with meaningful pre-listening tasks that ensures the elicitation of language, vocabulary, and factual knowledge, which are stored in the long-term memory.

Secondly, helping our students manage the amount of information they hear from the recorded texts does not solve their second main problem of not being able to recognize words and sounds. There might be some reasons to this problem, for example students did not learn the correct pronunciation, or they were not aware of connected speech rules, or they were not involved in relevant tasks when acquiring the new lexis (Goh, 1999; Sternberg, Sternberg & Mio, 2012; Gakonga, 2015). All in all, this difficulty should encourage teachers to evaluate how effectively we are introducing and reviewing vocabulary because there is a relationship between how we learn new words and our

ability to recognize them in connected speech. That is why, I think bottom-up processes can assist students in overcoming this problem as it allows them to work on the identification of key words and prosodic features like stress and intonation (Richards, 2008). However, we should not underestimate top-down processes since they ease the understanding of the recording by associating the spoken text to the prior knowledge that this process suggests eliciting in the pre-listening stage.

Thirdly, our students can argue that practising how to identify words in connected speech and how to retain them in their memory would not solve their difficulty of understanding the intended message. This comment urges us to explain to them two important facts. On the one hand, developing the listening skill does require time and practice, so they should keep their motivation alive, and we should sustain it too. On the other hand, listeners are not supposed to understand every single word of the spoken speech, but the words that convey the meaning of the utterance. One more time, teachers are challenged to plan relevant activities that provide them with a listening purpose and the social context of the conversation they will be hearing. I agree with the idea of giving students a purpose to listen to the recording as well as some cues that they would have in real life conversations and that are not part of the listening task itself (2004). This information is included in the pre-listening stage. Besides, if these factors are related to our students' needs and interests, they might find a connection with the recorded text, so they could also easily associate it to the purpose they have just assimilated (Sternberg, Sternberg & Mio, 2012). It is important to keep in mind that all these actions would work provided that we encourage our students to take agency of their learning process. There is no point in doing all the job if learners do not become competent listeners in the second/foreign language. Hence, the last reason to claim listening is a challenging skill to teach is that it requires teachers to raise students' awareness of their role in the listening process.

4. STUDENTS' ROLE IN THE LISTENING PROCESS

Teachers are called for planning tasks to promote strategies that enable learners to skilfully approach listening activities. Students can apply several mental activities (cognitive) and management tasks (metacognitive) to perform better in each of the listening stages (Richards, 2008) if we provide them with practice. As a result, I have grouped the strategies according to the phase in which they will be more necessary. In this last section I describe some strategies that, from my point of view, could be practiced in the classroom, so that learners can deal with the four main listening comprehension problems discovered in Goh's study.

Regarding the pre-listening stage, we should give students opportunities to consciously plan or predict what they will be listening to. The activities in this stage should develop the understanding about the situation, social context, key vocabulary and its pronunciation, and the appropriate strategies that would help the working memory to process the information in the utilisation stage. One might claim that some students will not follow our guidance in this matter, however, in my teaching experience, I have realized students work better if they know what they are expected to do, and even better when they see the benefits of an activity that is appealing to their needs and interests.

In the while-listening stage, students should be trained to overcome problems at the perceptual and parsing level to not neglect the rest of the message and ensure its understanding (Goh, 1999). The activities should prepare students to monitor their performance and even to apply problem-solving strategies every time they are allowed to listen to the recording. For instance, when they are monitoring their listening, they need to learn about compensatory strategies such as inference, contextualization and prediction in case they get lost or confused during the tasks. They can also apply the direct attention and listen selectively metacognitive strategies as well as note-taking because all of them facilitates the identification of key words, discourse markers, and aid the brain to keep focused. Besides, learning these strategies teach learners how to manage “stressful situations”, to use the knowledge that was elicited in the pre-listening phase, and to try to make sense of what they hear.

In the post-listening stage, it is recommendable to engage students in self-assessment activities. They have to learn to reflect on their learning process to determine whether they applied effective strategies or not. Furthermore, students can discuss in pairs or groups what they should do to improve their bottom-up (perception) and top-down (understanding) processes. There must be a room to study and share this assessment after the listening tasks and tests, and students should be encouraged to give and receive peer and group feedback. This strategy will strengthen students’ proficiency as competent and autonomous listeners.

5. CONCLUSIONS

By and large, this essay has attempted to analyse the reasons why it is possible to say it is challenging to teach the listening skill. The rationale of this essay aims to support the idea that listening is not a passive skill that requires students to pay “attention”, but that it is a compromise for teachers, and that we should devote some time to plan the activities that will actually benefit our students during this complex process. This skill demands us to be

constantly assessing the effectiveness of our approach, the appropriateness of the activities, and the development of our students' listening skill and metacognitive awareness. I believe that being aware of what we are supposed to know and do to teach this skill, somehow, eases the challenging task of guiding our students to become competent listeners.

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