

## **An Overview of Listening and L2 Listening Process**

### **Language Skills**

Anyone who uses languages rightly will have a number of abilities for example listening to the radio, speaking over the telephone, reading books, writing letters, watching television and so on. Therefore, language is called a complex skill. It comprises of four major skills. They are listening, speaking, reading and writing. The researchers of language broadly divide the (Linguistic) language skills into two groups that are receptive and productive skills.

Speaking and Writing skills come under productive skill whereas, listening and reading under receptive skills. Listening is a passive skill so that many teachers assume that it is quite easy. But it should be remembered that there are many factors related to listening over which the student in ESL classroom has no control, therefore it should be taught systematically along with the speaking skill, the learners should be exposed to learn with different types of listening passages as much as possible in the classroom. Moreover, consistently it is recommended that one should begin with the Listening skill before focusing on the Speaking skill. Anderson & Lynch (1988) says “Listening skills are important as speaking skills; we cannot communicate face-to-face unless the two types of skill are developed in random.”

### **Listening**

According to M. AshratRizVi (2007) Listening is an important communicative process and is crucial to effective communication. It is a process of receiving and interpreting the spoken words. It involves recognising what is said and comprehending the matter. Listening begins with physical hearing of the message and taking note of it. When we listen, we have to construct a parallel message based on the sound clues received from the speaker. The person should be aware of prejudices and biases so that he/she can avoid making wrong conclusions. Response is the action or reaction of the listener to the messages he received. It is the last stage of listening. If the message has been analysed, interpreted, and evaluated correctly, the response will be

appropriate. The response makes the communication more effective as it clarifies the message and helps the speaker to know whether the message has been understood or not.

Richard (1986) and Robin (1987) define that listening is very much an active process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues. Krashen (1981) explains that comprehension may be at the heart of the language acquisitions process: perhaps we acquire by understanding language that is 'little beyond' our current level of competence. This is done with the aid of extra-linguistics contexts and our knowledge of the world. Brownell (1986) has classified the six parts of listening process. There are hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evolution, and responsibility. Likewise, foreign language specialist Penny Ur (1984) categorizes listening for comprehension. Wolvin and Coakley (1982) define listening as the process of receiving attending to and assigning meaning to aural stimuli. Thus, listening comprehension is not only understanding the word but also understanding and retrieving the meaning from the speaker's speech. Many researchers have defined listening skill in different ways, here the researcher focus on the listening skill as a process of receiving the message from the speaker and further comprehend it without any barriers.

The expression of our inner thoughts, feelings and opinions clearly and effectively is only half of the communication process. The other half includes listening and understanding what others communicate to us. When a person decides to communicate with another person, he/she does so to fulfill a need. While communicating the person should select the method of code which he/she believes that it will effectively deliver the message to other person. The code used to send message can be either verbal or nonverbal. When the other person receives the coded message, they go through the process of decoding or interpreting it into understanding the meaning. Effective communication exists between two people. The receiver interprets and understands the sender's message in the same way the sender intended it.

Listening is an essential part of the communication process. Students spend most of the time in school listening to the lectures of the teachers thereby through this process they are acquiring

listening skill. It is essential that students should be given the opportunities to practice the behaviours of effective listeners in classroom environment. Teaching the active use of language to the students will help them to listen effectively and also to develop their language ability and mature. Listening is more than hearing as it's competence the spoken language by the process of thinking skills.

Developing effective listening abilities cannot be left to chance. Active listening experiences should be structural into daily English language arts activities. Students learn to value listening when it is given a prominent role in the English language arts classroom and when it is meaningfully integrated with their speaking, writing, and reading experiences.

Exposure to oral English is very important for ESL students, who need to hear the language spoken in meaningful contexts in order to acquire it. Their receptive (Listening) language abilities precede their expressive (speaking) language abilities, so they need to spend a great deal of time listening before and as they develop their speaking abilities.

Students became active listeners when they deliberately attend to the speakers' message with the intention of immediately applying or assessing the ideas or information. For example, students may take notes if they wish to refer to the information. They may offer words of agreement or ask questions as part of communication. They may formulate questions to ask to the speaker or they may evaluate the message, detaining the speaker's media.

Listening comprehension depends on the storing and processing of information by the receiver's mind. It retrieves from the listener's mental dictionary to match the sequence of sound that has been already heard.

### **The Listening Process**

To communicate adequately it is important for a listener to understand what the speaker says. Understanding spoken language can be described as an inferential process based on the perception of several cues rather than a simple match between sounds and meaning. The

listening comprehension process is a combination of four sub-processes or modules. They are as following.

- (i) **Hearing:** The auditory reception of an acoustic signal (perception), as is also performed on non-speech sounds,
- (ii) **Categorisation of Sounds:** Categorising incoming sounds in terms of the sound categories of the language
- (iii) **Word Recognition:** breaking up the stream of sounds into linguistic units (morphemes, words) and retrieving their meaning from long term memory, and
- (iv) **Comprehension:** integrating the meanings of the words in their sequence into an interpretation of the entire utterance, i.e., a reconstruction of the speaker's communicative intention (message).

Obviously, the third and fourth modules draw heavily on linguistic knowledge. Both lexical knowledge, needed to recognize words, and knowledge of the rule system of the language, needed to decode the grammatical relationships among the words that make up the sentence, are part of the listener's linguistic competence (Ellis 2000). However, especially at the third stage, knowledge of the world, i.e., non-linguistic knowledge plays an often-indispensable role in the listening process.

### Figure - 1

#### Simplified overview of the sub-processes of the listening comprehension process

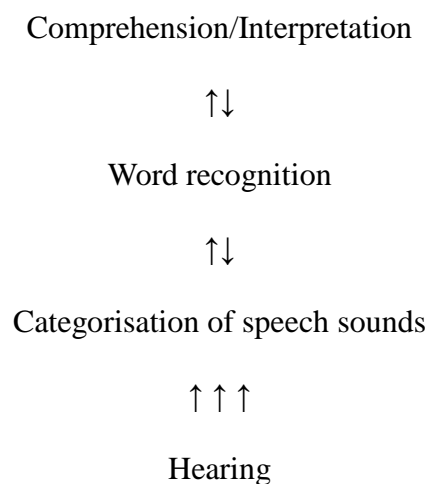


Figure No.1 shows the different sub-processes of the listening comprehension process. Each of the sub-processes displayed in Figure 2 can be a source of listening comprehension problems.

Learner's knowledge of the language influences the comprehension process seems obvious. It is only when language users know words and grammatical structures of a language that they can recognise them. The comprehension sub-process does not only depend on lexical and grammatical, but also pragmatic knowledge and 'knowledge of the world'.

As far as pragmatics is concerned, there are three key notions that play a role here (Rost 2002):

**(i) Deixis**

Deictic elements are often employed by a speaker, and interpreted by the listener, as elements that do not directly – but only indirectly – refer to objects in the 'real world'. Consider the following discourse: Beatrix is the queen of The Netherlands. She lives in The Hague. Here the proper noun 'Beatrix' holds a direct and constant correspondence to a person in the real world. The interpretation of the deictic element 'she' in the second sentence is indirect and variable. To resolve the referent of 'she', the listener first has to establish that she is co-referential with Beatrix. Deictic elements are commonly used for making variable, context-dependent reference to. For example, moments in time (e.g., Yesterday, Now), locations in space (e.g., here, there), and objects in the time-space continuum (through pronouns).

**(ii) Intention**

The notion of intention refers to the speakers' goals i.e., When they produce an utterance, they want to have some kind of influence on the listener, and act in a certain way to accomplish the desired influence. Generally the speaker's intention is completely determining the choice of words, the grammatical structures used and sometimes also the gestures. There are situations, however, where an inferential leap is required on the part of the listener in order to correctly interpret the speaker's intention. Irony or sarcasm typically has to be inferred from the context.

In other words, the inferential work may have to be done by the listener, a speaker saying ‘It is rather cold in here’ should actually be interpreted as issuing a subtle command for the addressee to get up and close the window (Searle 1975).

### **(iii) Strategic use**

Speakers generally have multiple options at their disposal to accomplish their goal. It is an integral part of the comprehension sub-process that the listener does not only recognize what it is that the speaker wishes to accomplish (intention) but that the listener is also aware of the way the speaker uses to reach this objective. For instance: by being authoritarian, by expressing anger, by being friendly or polite, etc. The so-called indirect speech act illustrated above is a clear example of a speaker-strategy that requires a lot of inferential work on the part of the listener.

Knowledge of the world also play a role in the comprehension and interpretation of speech. For a good interpretation of direct speech, and certainly for the interpretation of indirect speech, it is important that the listener and the speaker share background knowledge. Effective recovery of background knowledge and use of the pragmatic keys described above will optimise the listening process.

### **The L2 Listening Process**

There are obvious differences between acquiring listening comprehension skills in the first and in the second language. The acquisition of the L1 listening comprehension skill happens largely at the same time that the child develops its general cognitive abilities. The development of the L2 listening processes occurs after the learner’s cognitive development which is more or less completed. When acquiring a foreign language, learners have to learn mainly what the L2-words and grammatical forms refer to (Gathercole and Thorn 1998). They have to acquire the differences between their L1 and the L2. In this light the idea of ‘conceptual redeployment’ has to be mentioned (Churchland, 1999).

Conceptual redeployment can be defined as the process in which a fully developed conceptual framework that is in regular use in some domain of experience or comprehension. For

example L1 comprehension, comes to be used for the first time in a new domain. In the case of L2 learning, adults must reorganize semantic knowledge of words and concepts into a new domain of language use, in their L2.

For successful second language learning it is important that there is enough correct language input. The kind of input that second language learners receive has been the object of research for several years. The speech input directed by L1 speakers towards L2 learners, which is often referred to as ‘foreigner talk’. It shows some similarities with the modified input of child-directed speech, adjustments are to be noted at several linguistic levels. For example, the phonology and the phonetics of foreigner talk differ from regular L1 talk in that there is more use of pauses, that there are fewer contractions and that there is a wider pitch range.

The discussion on the effect of this modified input and the way L2-learners deal with non-modified input has not been ended yet. In L2-research (Ellis, 2000) has four different approaches of dealing with input can be distinguished. They are as following.

- Studies that focus on the frequency of linguistic structures in the input.
- Studies that focus on discourse and the way discourse construction is linked to acquisition.
- Studies that relate the input to the output of L2-learners.
- Studies that focus on the comprehensibility of the input.

A theory about the relation between input and improving comprehension is the ‘Input Hypothesis’ (Krashen, 1982 and 1985). The Input Hypothesis points out that learner naturally develop their understanding and comprehension of the language by understanding only input that is slightly above their current language proficiency level. If the current level of the language learner is denoted as ‘i’ then the next-higher level ‘i+1’ can be reached by training with understanding and comprehension input at level ‘i+1’. Input materials at the current level ‘i’ contribute no new information, whereas input at level ‘i+2’ would be too difficult to understand at all. Lack of empirical support and testability of this theory is a source of criticism.

Acquiring listening comprehension was made clear in the previous paragraphs. Acquiring listening comprehension in L2 is a different cognitive process than the acquisition of listening skills in one's mother tongue. When learning a second language, learners already know how to listen in their L1. Listeners have (unconscious) knowledge of (L1) listening strategies and their effects on the listening comprehension process. They can use some of these strategies, schemata and scripts while listening to the L2. In fact, for beginning language learners this higher-order knowledge is the most important source. By leaning on these mainly higher-order strategies, there will be less focus on the exact linguistic features of the utterance, i.e., less focus on the input itself. It is thus not the case that all input contributes to the learner's knowledge and understanding of the language; not all input becomes 'intake'. Sharwood Smith (1986) makes a distinction between input that helps the learner interpret the utterance and input that learners use to expand their language knowledge. Only the latter kind of input may become intake. Ellis (2000) defines intake as 'information stored in temporary memory which may or may not be subsequently accommodated in the inter language system'. Chaudron (1985) and (Ellis 2000) describe intake as a process that mediates between target language input and the learner's internalised set of rules.

As it was explained above, the language learners may lean on higher-order processes as well as, on lower-order processes while processing language input. Research has been done to establish the relative importance of lower-order versus higher-order processes, and to determine the relationship between these processes and overall listening proficiency. Tsui and Fullilove (1998) state that: 'While some studies have found that less-skilled readers/listeners are deficient in top-down processing skills, others have contradicted this, citing evidence that, in fact, less-skilled readers/listeners lack bottom-up processing skills.' The authors looked at the results on (part of) The Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) English Language, in order to establish the importance of bottom-up versus top-down processes as a discriminator of listening performance, and this way found out what kind of processes are typically used by



skilled listeners. The material had the design of the paradigm often used in listening research and education, namely a listening text with multiple-choice questions. There were furthermore, two kinds of schemata the first type of schema activated by the initial input was consistent with the following input and in the second type, the schema activated in the beginning was not consistent with the subsequent input. In this latter case, participants had to be able to revise the schema so that to give a correct answer. Here the bottom-up processes are important. In the case of the 'matching' schemata, participants can rely largely on top-down processes to give a correct answer. The authors concluded that bottom-up processing was more important than top-down processing in discriminating the listening performance. They state that '... on the one hand because less skilled L2 listeners are weak in bottom-up processing, initially they need plenty of contextual support to compensate for the lack of automatized linguistic decoding skills. On the other hand, they need to learn to become less reliant on guessing from contextual or prior knowledge and more reliant on rapid and accurate decoding of the linguistic input.' In other words, as the decoding (or recognition) process becomes more automatized, the reliance on the higher-order processes may become weaker. This indicates that skilled learners make use of both top-down processes and (automatized) bottom-up processes, less skilled learners lack the automatization of the lower-order processes.

In conclusion, we can state that both bottom-up and top-down processes are important for successful listening comprehension. In second language learning, the difference between skilled and less-skilled learners lies in the status of the lower-order processes (ranging from more controlled to fully automatized). This implies that to improve the listening comprehension skills of second language learners, the focus has to be on lower-order processes.

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