

An Analysis on How to Improve Tertiary EFL Students' Listening Skill of English

Mohammad. Nurul Islam

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Faculty of Languages & Translation

King Khalid University, Abha-9100, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

E-mail:nurulelt313@yahoo.com

Received: March 2, 2011

Accepted: March 26, 2012

Published: May 1, 2012

10.5296/jse.v2i2.935

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/jse.v2i2.935>

Abstract

Listening ability is very important in communication. Most tertiary EFL students feel hard to improve their listening ability when studying English because there is no English language environment in a non-native country (Saudi Arabia). In fact, the right way of practice is very useful for students to improve their listening skill. In this article, some practical suggestions are brought up and they might be helpful to the students.

Keywords: Listening skill, Self-confidence, Practice.

1. Introduction

Beginning in the early 70's, work by Asher, Postovsky, Winitz and, later, Krashen, brought attention to the role of listening as a tool for understanding and emphasized it as a key factor in facilitating language learning. Thus, listening has emerged as an important component in the process of second language acquisition (Feyten, 1991).

According to Howatt and Dakin (1974), listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously. Thomlison's (1984) definition of listening includes "active listening," which goes beyond comprehending as understanding the message content, to comprehension as an act of empathetic understanding of the speaker. Furthermore, Gordon (1985) argues that empathy is essential to listening and contends that it is more than a polite attempt to identify a speaker's perspectives. Rather more importantly, empathetic understanding expands to "egocentric prosocial behavior". Thus, the listener altruistically acknowledges concern for the speaker's welfare and interests. Ronald and Roskelly (1985) define listening as an active process requiring the same skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalizing that writing and reading demand; and these authors present specific exercises to make students active listeners who are aware of the "inner voice" one hears when writing.

People spend more than 45 percent of their communication time listening, according to an article by Dick Lee and Delmar Hatesohl published through the University of Missouri Extension (1993). Though people tend to spend substantially more time listening than they do talking, reading or writing, most people don't have great listening skills, according to Lee and Hatesohl. In studying English, most tertiary students in a non-native country (Saudi Arabia) feel hard in improving their listening ability. ***"Seek first to understand, then to be understood"***

Listening is very important in communicating with others. According to L. Miller (2003), more than forty percent of our daily communication is spent on listening, thirty-five percent on speaking, about sixteen percent on reading, and only nine percent on writing. In the five respects of learning English, listening (understanding), speaking, reading, writing and translating, which represent university students' general ability of English, listening is the most important. However, listening is usually the weakest point for most Saudi students because of less and incompatible practice. How to improve students' English listening ability effectively? In my experience, the following should be useful.

2. Hearing vs. Listening

"I Hear You, But I'm Not Listening" *Most of us retain only one-fourth of what we hear.*

Hearing and listening are not the same thing. Think of it this way: Hearing can be compared to listening just like seeing can be compared to reading. A person who is dyslexic can see the letters on a page, but unless he receives proper training, he can't really understand their meaning.

Most of us are not natural listeners even though much of our day requires this skill. We learn how to read and write, but how many of us have ever taken a class on listening? Yet, it's been said that up to 80% of our waking hours are spent communicating in some way, and over half of that time is spent listening. Studies describe most people as poor listeners. It's as though we could say, "I hear you, but I'm not listening." Why? One reason is because we can think faster than we speak. Most of us can speak up to 125 words per minute, but we have the ability to understand the spoken word at gusts of up to 400 words per minute. The vast difference between speaking speed and thought speed means that when we listen we're only using about 25% of our mental capacity ... so our minds tend to wander. In general, we understand and retain only one-fourth of what we hear.

3. Four Styles of Listening

To make matters worse, we not only are poor listeners, but we also have different listening styles. Rick Warren (2007) has identified and described four types of listeners as follows:

1. The Judgmental Listener. This person already has his mind made up and doesn't want to be confused by the facts.
2. Interrogative Listener. This person thinks that good listening consists of continuously firing a series of questions at the person.
3. The Advice-Giving Listener. They listen only long enough to make a quick assessment and then they get to what they really want to do—offer unsolicited advice.
4. Empathetic Listener. This person listens to capture the feelings of the speaker, not just the content of words. The Empathetic Listener pays attention to nonverbal signs such as tone, facial expressions, and body language. This involves listening with eyes, not just ears.

I would love to tell you that I'm naturally an empathetic listener. That's who I want to be. But I learn more towards giving advice. I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to help and give suggestions, but they are not useful unless someone wants advice. After all, God waits for us to ask Him. Another reason that we often don't listen well is because of our poor listening habits (Rick Warren, 2007).

4. Three Ways to Improve Listening Skill

Ralph G. Nichols (1967), an American professor of Rhetoric at the University of Minnesota says there are three things that we can do to help ourselves stop wasting thought power and become a better listener. One is to anticipate the speaker's next point. If you anticipate correctly, learning has been reinforced. If you anticipate incorrectly, you wonder why and this too helps to increase attention. Another is to identify the supporting elements a speaker uses in building points. By and large, we use only three ways to build points: We explain the point, we get emotional and harangue the point, or we illustrate the point with a factual illustration. A sophisticated listener knows this. He or she spends a little of the differential between thought speed and speaking speed to identify what is being used as point-supporting material. This becomes highly profitable in terms of listening efficiency. A third way to improve yourself as a listener is to periodically make mental summaries as you listen. A good listener takes

advantage of short pauses to summarize mentally what has been said. These periodic summaries reinforce learning tremendously.

In summary, most of us are poor listeners for a variety of reasons. We have had little training and few training opportunities exist. We think faster than others speak. Listening is hard work.

5. The Following Suggestions are Offered to Tertiary Students for Enhancing Listening Skills Effectively

5.1 Lend a hand the students' to build their self-confidence and lift up their interest

Students success in their studies depend upon their ability, how effectively understand (listen) English as a language of instruction (Richard, 1982). Most students did not receive enough listening training during their high school study. After they enter the university, they feel upset when they first have listening class. They will feel nervous and worried when they find they could understand little about what they hear, which makes them more difficult to catch it. If the students find that they cannot make much progress a period of time later, they will usually become afraid of more difficulties and lose their interest in English study. Therefore, teachers should first tell them the way how to improve their English listening ability, and let them realize the arduousness and progressiveness in order to help them build their self-confidence.

In teaching, the teachers should make the class more lively and interesting by providing various materials, such as English songs, interesting spoken dialogues of movies and so on, to increase their learning interest. This is easy to do when they are interested in what they are doing; it is difficult to do when they are not especially interested (Richard, 1982).

5.2 Help the Students to Get Necessary Knowledge of Pronunciation

A good master of basic rules of pronunciation is the fundamental thing for anyone to improve English listening. In listening class, teachers should pay more attention to the following aspects:

5.2.1 Stress

If an English word has more than one syllable, not all the syllables are equally prominent. Those that are more prominent than others are said to receive the accent. There are different degrees of prominence: extra loud, loud, medium weak, etc. Generally two stresses are marked: loud or primary (') and medium or secondary (,) Word stress is marked in different ways in different dictionaries The following method which is used in most modern books on linguistics and phonetics, is adopted in the present article; primary stress is marked with a small vertical bar (') above and in front of the syllable to which it refers. Secondary stress is marked with a small vertical bar (,) below and in front of the syllable to which it refers. Examples: Dis,crimi'nation, Pre,par'ration etc.

There may be more than one prominent syllable in an English polysyllabic word. One of the syllables receives the primary stress and the other prominent syllable receives secondary stress. The primary stress is also called the tonic stress. A strong stress accompanied by a

pitch change or pitch movement is known as primary stress. Rodger Kingdon (1958) says, ‘the prominence of a syllable is also affected by its pitch; high-pitched syllables sound more prominent than low-pitched ones’.

Teacher should show word stress visually. Stress is shown by the teacher making a decisive downward gesture with a closed fist to indicate the stressed syllables. Such techniques although simple are more effective and more fun for majority of students than complex systems of written expression.

5.2.2 Weak Forms

In English, the particles such as preposition, articles, conjunctions usually have two types of pronunciation: stressed and unstressed. If stressed, it means that those particles should be pronounced separately. However, those particles are usually unstressed when they are read in sentences. The unstressed is usually demonstrated by reduced vowel: “at”

[æt] is reduced to [et]. In oral English, the faster it is spoken, the more reduced vowels there are, and therefore, it is more difficult to understand.

Students should be given rigorous practice in the use of weak forms in addition to the distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables.

5.2.3 Assimilation

Assimilation refers to that one sound is influenced by its adjacent sounds. For example, when consonant [d] is followed by [j], it is usually assimilated to [dʒ] and when consonant [t] is followed by [j], it is assimilated to [tʃ]

For teaching assimilation, emphasis must be laid on the students’ ability to produce the sound in context.

5.2.4 Intonation

Intonation is the term used for the melody of speech, variations of pitch of the voice.

In an intonation language, “the melody of any individual word is a fragment of the melodic pattern of the whole sentence” (Abercrombie, 1967). Since important changes normally occur only on stressed syllables, the melody of speech is controlled by stress to a certain extent. A sentence can be spoken definitely, hesitantly, angrily or kindly, it can also be uttered with or without interest. Examples: Sorry! (Apology) Sorry? (Please repeat)

These distinctions are generally highlighted by the tunes one uses while speaking. These tunes add something to the words (even though the words remain the same in meaning without any change) and what is added is the teaching of intonation usually most effective when the teacher uses the simplest methods of presentation even though students may find intonation difficult. An efficient technique of teaching English intonation involves giving an exaggerated model and indicating the pitch movements by movements of the hand or by simple drawing of arrows on the blackboard.

Speaker's feelings at a particular moment. This way of using tunes can be defined as intonation.

5.2.5 The pronunciation Difference of British English and American English

George Bernard Shaw (2007) said famously that the American and the British were "two nations separated by a common language". There are some pronunciation differences in British English and American English. For example, when the letter "a" is before consonants [s], [θ], [f], [m] or [n], it is pronounced as [æ] in American English, but it is pronounced as [ɑ:]. In British English, the letter "r" is pronounced only when it is before vowel and not pronounced after a vowel while it is usually pronounced as rolled [r]. The combination of letters "wh" is pronounced as [w] in British English but [hw] in American English and etc.

As well as the differences in vocabulary we just considered, it is also possible to spot divergences in grammar and country-specific structures in 'British' and 'American' documents. There are often no strict rules; it is merely a question of usage and the outcome of how the language has evolved in each country.

Mistakes can easily be averted by choosing the appropriate language (American or British English) in your word processing software and executing a spell-check, seems obvious, but is easy to forget!

5.3 Guide the Students to Have A Right Hearing Habit

Mark Twain (1835 - 1910) said, "If we were meant to talk more than we listen, we would have two mouths and one ear". Effective listening can be a tough skill to master. It involves body language, mental awareness and active listening behaviors rather than passive habits. Good listeners are receptors of information presented by speakers.

First of all, let the students to have habit of expectation in hearing practice. Expectation refers to that the listener gives a quick judgment to the unknown information according to the known information. Teachers should instruct the students to preview the questions given so that they can be prepared and have some expectation to what will be heard with specific environment and cultural background. Besides, teachers should pay more attention to training the students to have the habit of catching key words and important information in listening practice. In fluent English, the pronunciation of some words will have some changes influenced by weak beat, assimilation, and the loss of burst of some stop consonants so that it is impossible for the listeners to hear every word clearly. The students should listen to some materials selectively. When listening to essays, the listeners should pay attention to the key sentences at the beginning and the end. They should try to make the questions clear, such as "who, where, when, what and why" and so on.

5.4 Improve Their Listening Ability with More Reading

The popular problems the students often come across are as follows: new words---some key words are great obstacle for students to understand the sentence or the paragraph; sentence structure (grammar) ---the coexistence of several grammar structures in one complete sentence will affect the proper understanding of the sentence. How to overcome those

obstacles? Those obstacles can be overcome by more reading because reading, as listening, requires a general ability consisting of speed, memory, judgment, summary and understanding and they follow similar way of thinking. Reading can help the students to enlarge their vocabulary, make better understanding of the word meaning, grammar rules, and widen the range of their knowledge, which are very helpful to the students to have better understanding of the reading materials. By reading, the students can train their ability of thinking, comprehension and summary and thus to increase their speed and accuracy in listening practice. Extensive reading and quick reading might be the most helpful way for students to improve their hearing. In practice, students should try to enlarge their vocabulary based on understanding and train the ability to shift from one sentence to another. Students should pay equal attention to speed and understanding. When reading, the students should not always consult the dictionary whenever coming across a new word in order to keep a smooth consistent understanding. The reading materials should be similar to the listening materials in difficulty. Students may benefit from listening to the radio or listening to text as they read it. They could try reading text aloud and using a tape recorder to play it back to themselves.

5.5 Instruct the Students to Have More Extensive Listening in Their Spare Time

In universities, the students have limited listening classes, usually one class every week, which is not enough for the students to improve their hearing effectively. Teachers should give the students instruction for their after-class practice, such as watch English program on TV and English videos, listening English radio and English songs so that the students can get familiar with people of different accents, different sexes, different ages, and different cultural background. In this way, the students can widen their range of knowledge and train their good literary sense and thus to improve their hearing ability. Rachel Naomi Remen, a famous American Clinical Professor (1997) said: "The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give to each other is our attention. . .

Pay attention. Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge the message. Recognize that what is not said also speaks loudly.

- o Look at the speaker directly.
- o Put aside distracting thoughts. Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!
- o Avoid being distracted by environmental factors.
- o "Listen" to the speaker's body language.
- o Refrain from side conversations when listening in a group setting.

6. Some Common Practical Tips to Improve Listening Skills

- Listen carefully so that you will be able to understand, comprehend, and evaluate. Careful listening will require a conscious effort on your part. You must be aware of the verbal and non-verbal messages (reading between the lines).

- Be mentally and physically prepared to listen. Put other thoughts out of your mind. Your attention will be diverted from listening if you try to think of answers in advance.
- You can't hear if YOU do all the talking. Don't talk too much.
- Think about the topic in advance, if possible. Be prepared to listen.
- Listen with empathy. See the situation from the other's point of view. Try to put yourself in their shoes.
- Be courteous; don't interrupt. Take notes if you worry about forgetting a particular point.
- Avoid stereotyping individuals by making assumptions about how you expect them to act. This will bias your listening.
- Listen to how something is said. Be alert for what is left unsaid.
- Make certain everyone involved gets an opportunity to voice their opinions. Don't let one person dominate the conversation.
- Face those you are talking with, lean slightly forward, and make eye contact. Use body to show your interest, concern.

7. A Life-Long Process

The next time we feel like someone is speaking a foreign language; let's ask God to help us really listen. It won't be easy. Actually, effective listening is very hard work ... a life-long process. Listening isn't natural. It takes the focus off of ourselves and puts it on another. But if we really think about it, heart-felt listening is a gift of love. And love says, "I hear you, and I'm listening." Most of us are poor listeners for a variety of reasons. We have had little training and few training opportunities exist. We think faster than others speak. Listening is hard work.

We've listed some ways to improve listening.

To concentrate, to summarize, to avoid faking, and others. Just as important are your attitudes — be positive, concerned, and sincere. It's a challenge to be a good listener. But good listeners get big rewards.

It takes a lot of concentration and determination to be an active listener. Old habits are hard to break, and if your listening habits are as bad as many people's are, then there's a lot of habit-breaking to do! Be deliberate with your listening and remind yourself constantly that your goal is to truly hear what the other person is saying. Set aside all other thoughts and behaviors and concentrate on the message. Ask question, reflect, and paraphrase to ensure you understand the message. If you don't, then you'll find that what someone says to you and what you hear can be amazingly different! Start using active listening today to become a better communicator and improve your study effectively.

The implications of creative approach to developing listening skills are to diversify listening practice make it individual, which is possible by employing online listening facilities. Application of creative approach to teaching and learning skills of listening might be helpful. Some teaching and learning tips are suggested.

8. Conclusion

English listening competence is a complex skill that needs conscious development. It can be best developed with practice when students reflect on the process of listening without the threat of evaluation. Guiding students through the process of listening provides them with the knowledge from which they can successfully complete a listening task; it also motivates them and puts them in control of their learning (Vandergrift, 2002). It was found that by focusing on the process of listening students acquired a useful tool to raise their English comprehensive competence. The above discussions indicate that listening comprehension is foundational in learning a foreign language. Furthermore, listening comprehension levels do influence the capacity for improvement in other language skills such as speaking, reading, writing and translating. The evidence from this study suggests sound reasons for emphasizing listening comprehension, which highlights the importance of spending much more time doing it. However, improving Saudi students' ability as English speakers is a demanding process and there are still many factors, intellectual and nonintellectual, subjective and objective, influencing language acquisition that needs to be considered and further explored.

References

- Abercrombie, D. (1967). *Elements of General Linguistics*. Edinburgh.
- Bloomfield, L. (1994). *Language*. M.B. Publishers (pvt).Ltd. New Delhi.
- Du, Xuanying. (2006). *The Application of Sensibility and Perception Strategy in English Teaching*. *High Education and Academic Study*.
- Feyten, C. M. (1991). The Power of Listening Ability: An Overlooked Dimension in Language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 75, 173-80.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb05348.x>
- Gimson, A.C. (1987). *An Introduction to the pronunciation of English*. London.
- Gordon, Ronald D. (1985). Empathy: the state of the art and science. Paper presented at the International Conference of the World Communication Association. 16pp. [ED 260 470]
- Howatt, A., & J. Dakin. (1974). *Language laboratory materials*, ed. J. P. B. Allen, S. P. B. Allen, and S. P. Corder.
- Islam, N. M. (2010). The pedagogical application of English word stress patterns. *Banglavisision Journal*, 2(2).
- Islam, N. M. (2010). Teaching Intonation in Spoken English. *World Vision Journa*, 3(1).
- Jones, D. (1967). *Everyman's' pronouncing Dictionary*. E.L.B.S. London.

- Kingdon, R. (1958). *The ground of English Stress*. London.
- Miller L. (2003). Developing Listening Skills with Authentic Materials. *ESL Magazine*.
- Moniruzzaman, M. (2004). Teaching Stress placement within the word. *Harvest*, 19.
- Qi, Lirong., Zhan, Qingchen, & Wang, Dong. (2007). A Search on the Teaching of English Listening. *Journal of Bethune Medical School*.
- Ralph G. Nichols. (1967). *Are You Listening?* The Benjamin Company by arrangement with McGraw-Hill Book Co.
- Remen, Rachel Naomi. (1997). Listening: a powerful tool for healing. *Science of Mind*, 70(7):14-19.
- Ronald, Katharine, & Roskelly, Hephzibah. (1985). Listening as an act of composing. Paper presented at the 36th Conference on College Composition and Communication, 12pp. [ED 257 094]
- Shuja, A. (1996). *A Course in Spoken English*. A.P.H. Publishing corp. New Delhi.
- Su, Hang. (2000). The Thought about English Teaching of Listening and Speaking in the New Age. *High Education Study*.
- Thomlison, T. Dean. (1984). Relational listening: theoretical and practical considerations. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the 5th International Listening Association, 30pp. [ED 257 165]
- Vandergrift. (1997a). Listening: theory and practice in modern foreign language competence <http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/ref6#ref6>
- Yorkey, C. Richard. (1982). *Study Skills*. McGraw- Hill, Newyork.
- www.aare.edu.au/05pap/guo05088.pdf
- <http://www.marymaywrites.com/IHearYou.html>