

LISTENING SKILLS IN LEARNING A LANGUAGE: THE IMPORTANCE, BENEFITS AND MEANS OF ENHANCEMENT

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Abstract: *The study deals with the main issues of listening skills in learning a foreign language. Efficient listening is an extremely important life skill and a key to effective communication. Although great deal of research has long been devoted to different issues of language learning, there is current need for a detailed examination of listening in learning a foreign language. Consequently, the survey aimed at considering and analysing the importance, benefits, and means of listening skills enhancement in a language learning. The key issues of listening in learning a foreign language have been studied and defined by the methods of monitoring and comparative analysis of internet resources. Considering the survey findings, further research perspectives of listening skills in learning a foreign language have been outlined.*

INTRODUCTION.

Listening is a key to all effective communication. The act of listening involves complex affective, cognitive, and behavioral processes. Affective processes include the motivation to listen to others; cognitive processes include attending to, understanding, receiving, and interpreting content and relational messages; and behavioral processes include responding to others with verbal and nonverbal feedback [1]. Effective listening is an extremely important life skill. It may serve a number of possible purposes, depending on the situation and the nature of the communication.

In learning a language, listening has often been overlooked. For most people, being able to claim knowledge of a second language means being able to speak and write in that language; listening and reading are therefore secondary skills [2]. The four language skills are always related in terms of

usage, and speaking is viewed by learners as the most desirable skill in the era of global communication. Effective listening, though, is vital as well, being neither the easiest nor the most meaningless language skill. Much language listening is imperative to communicate properly, meaningfully and naturally.

Great deal of research has long been devoted to various issues of language learning [2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11; 12; 13; 14; 15], as well as different aspects of foreign terminology [16; 17; 18; 19; 20; 21; 22; 23; 24; 25; 26; 27; 28; 29]. Nevertheless, there is still current need for a detailed examination of listening in learning a language. Consequently, the purpose of the study is to consider and analyse the importance, benefits, and means of listening skills enhancement in learning a foreign language.

MAIN MATERIAL.

The recent decades have seen a big change in the way a language listening is viewed and practised. We have moved on considerably from the rather vague notion of comprehension as the goal of a listening experience; instead, listening is now perceived to be a complex skill operating at several different levels, and needs to be practised accordingly [3]. Monitoring and comparative analysis of the internet resources [2; 3; 4; 5], reveal the key issues of listening in language learning to be as follows.

I. IMPORTANCE.

The most frequently used language skill. Although listening may seem secondary to other more active language skills, the importance of listening is undeniable. Many studies have shown that it is the most frequently used language skill by students. Listening is basically about how we acquire and learn the new information. As we obtain the necessary competence for listening effectively, the feedback we will receive on our performance as language listeners will help us correct the mistakes and greatly increase the motivation to keep on learning, as well as help us develop more confidence in using the language.

Great practice of language usage revision. Most language teaching approaches incorporate a listening component. When listening, we are consistently reviewing a lot of crucial language usage such as vocabulary, grammatical structures, intonation, accent and our own interpretation. We can learn new words and expressions by hearing them frequently. Besides the vital language usage revision, general knowledge from news or even advertising is

certainly beneficial for regular listeners. Listening is also a great way to train our attention.

The beneficial silent learning period. Language learners often go through a silent period where they do not say anything. Language teachers and researchers have not totally agreed whether it is a necessary stage of language learning, or how long it should be, but they do agree that many learners of a foreign language naturally experience it. The period of silent listening can actually be hugely beneficial. Speaking a new language can be quite a stressful experience, as new learners may often suffer from task overload. They are thinking too much, about what they should say next that they do not fully experience what the other person has said. Allowing themselves to be silent lets them get the most from listening.

Very active learning process. A silent process should not be confused with a passive process. Listening, actually, is a very active process, despite the fact you are not saying anything. That is why we may be so tired after an event in another language. Getting over the feeling that we are doing nothing is a significant step towards listening effectively. The fundamental techniques of active listening usually include agreeing noises, slight nodding the head and eye contact with the person who is talking. It is essential to remind yourself and others that you are involved in the conversation even if you do not speak so much.

The easiest way to learn the segmentation rules. Listening is a vital step to become familiar with the segmentation rules for how the foreign language is spoken. When we listen to someone talking, our brain starts processing the obtained information by segmenting it into small parts to store them in our short-term memory. It splits them up based on our knowledge of how the language is spoken. Instead of storing the actual words, the brain would convert them into some images for the storage. Learning the segmentation rules is usually an unconscious process, so the easiest way to learn them is to get lots of regular listening practice. It will not only improve your understanding, but will progress your speaking in the language as well.

II. BENEFITS.

Successful communication. Listening is an essential skill that we can all benefit from improving. By becoming a better listener, we can improve our productivity, as well as the ability to influence, persuade and negotiate, and avoid much conflict and misunderstanding. Good communication skills require a high level of self-awareness. Understanding your own personal style of

communicating will go a long way toward helping you to create good and lasting impressions with others. All of these are necessary to become more successful.

Greater productivity. Appropriate listening skills are great building blocks for success. Without the ability to listen effectively, messages are easily misunderstood. As a result, communication breaks down and the sender of the message can easily become frustrated or irritated. At the same time, good listening skills can lead to greater productivity with fewer mistakes, and increased sharing of necessary information. This, in turn, can lead to more creative and innovative performance, better interaction and relations with the speakers, as they feel you are actually listening to and comprehending them.

Comfort in a foreign environment. Improved listening skills mean improved relationships in a foreign environment. If your listening skills are very sharp, it is be easier for you to quickly hear and comprehend the foreign language that is spoken very far away. This can actually be a survival skill in the case of a natural disaster or other emergencies, when you need to be able to listen actively to what is being said around you, not just directly to you. Such a useful ability to listen effectively and comprehend the circumstances can be very essential indeed.

Familiarity with accents and dialects. A foreign language may be incredibly diverse. Better listening skills will help you be able to understand foreign speakers with different manner of pronunciation and accents. The way people speak the same language in one country can be quite different from the way it is spoken in the other one. Even some individual countries can be the place to hear many different ways of speaking a foreign language. Because of this, good listening skills can help you understand what people are saying in an unfamiliar accent or dialect.

Awareness of intensive and extensive listening. In language learning practice, a distinction is often made between the two main types of listening: the intensive listening, in which learners attempt to listen with maximum accuracy to a relatively brief sequence of speech; and the extensive listening, in which learners listen to lengthy passages for general comprehension. While intensive listening may be more effective in terms of developing specific aspects of listening ability, extensive listening is more effective in building a fluency and maintaining a learner motivation.

III. MEANS OF ENHANCEMENT.

Overcoming the barriers to effective listening. Often our main concern while

listening is to formulate the ways to respond. This is not a function of listening. We should rather try to focus fully on what is being said and how it is being said in order to more fully understand the speaker. To improve the process of effective listening, it can be helpful to look at the main barriers to effective listening, such as distraction and lack of clarity.

A common problem is that instead of listening closely to what someone is saying, we often get distracted after a sentence or two and instead start to think about what we are going to say in reply or think about unrelated things. This problem is attributed to the difference between average speech rate and average processing rate that is much higher. It is a common habit for the listener to use the spare time while listening to think about other things, rather than focusing on what the speaker is saying. This means that we do not fully listen to the rest of the speaker's message.

We may also get distracted by the speaker's personal appearance or by what someone else is saying, which sounds more interesting. These issues not only affect you, but you are likely to show your lack of attention in your body language as well. Generally, we find it much harder to control our body language, and are commonly likely to show the distraction by lack of eye contact, or posture. The speaker will easily detect the problem, and probably stop talking at best. At worse, they may be very offended or upset.

Of course, the clarity of what the speaker is saying can also affect how well we listen. Generally, we find it easier to focus if the speaker is fluent in their speech, has a familiar accent, and speaks at an appropriate loudness for the situation. It is more difficult, for example, to focus on somebody who is speaking very fast and very quietly, especially if they are conveying complex information. You should always seek clarification to ensure that your understanding is correct.

Implementing the acknowledged listening strategies. Two main listening strategies have recently dominated in language: the bottom-up processing and the top-down interpretation. The importance of both the listening strategies is generally recognised.

The bottom-up processing model assumes that listening is a process of decoding the sounds that one hears from the phonemes to complete texts. It means carefully listening to each sound, word and sentence structure to work out what has been said, the specifics are of major importance. Although bottom-up listening is a good strategy to use at a language class, it is, unfortunately, an incomplete listening strategy for use in the real world.

Actually, you cannot spend all your listening energy focusing on specific grammar in your everyday communication with people, as they will keep talking and you may be lost.

Top-down listening, on the other hand, is a great strategy to add more understanding of what is being said. It suggests an active construction or even reconstruction process, when the listener uses prior knowledge of the context and situation within which the listening takes place in order to make sense of what he or she hears. This basically means that you learn a little about the spoken topic beforehand. It may be a good idea to read up on the topic before going to see a presentation, a film or theatre play in a foreign language. Try reading about or predicting the content of an audio passage before you listen to it. This will get your brain focusing on concepts and not just specific words.

Considering that top-down listening focuses on concepts and bottom-up listening focuses on words, both strategies are well-established in learning to become an effective listener.

Becoming an active listener. A great way to improve your listening skills is to practice active listening. There are two forms of listening: active and passive. Active listening is focused listening. You are trying to truly understand the meaning behind what is being said. Passive listening simply involves hearing what is being said, but not really attempting to understand every word, for example playing music but not focusing on it. This is not very helpful in comprehension or memorizing some new information. To improve a foreign language comprehension, it is essential to be listening actively all the time, even when doing some casual listening like foreign music, TV or radio programme. Using the following listening techniques may become quite beneficial.

It is very useful to watch TV and films with subtitles in both foreign and your native language. This can be helpful because it allows you to quickly find the meaning of an unfamiliar word that you hear by reading the subtitles in your native language. Foreign subtitles can improve your ability to match the spoken with the written language. It can be difficult to find videos with simultaneous English and native language subtitles, but it is totally possible.

While studying a foreign language, it is essential to listen in to natural conversations. Try spending time in places where people are speaking the language, like cafes, parks or even public transport. Without disturbing anyone, just listen to what people are talking about, and train your ear to everyday foreign conversations. Pick out the words that you are learning or have already learned, focus on the meaning of the conversation. This is really helpful when

you are trying to actively listen and improve your foreign language comprehension.

The variety of speakers and listening material can be a positive challenge to improve your listening skills. There are naturally a lot of different accents and ways of any language speaking. To improve your ability to listen to the words that may be pronounced in various ways, you should practice with a variety of accents and types of foreign speakers. Some speakers do not speak clearly and may be more difficult to understand than others, listen to those people too. It is not very useful to habitually keep listening to conversations on the same topics only, make sure you listen to different topics that you are not familiar with as well. It is a good way to become a fluent language listener.

CONCLUSIONS.

On the grounds of the above research findings, the following conclusions can be made. The importance of listening in learning a language is undisputable, as it reveals to be the most frequently used language skill, great practice of language usage revision, the beneficial silent learning period, very active learning process, and the easiest way to learn the segmentation rules of language fluency. The main benefits of an effective language listening have been found to comprise successful communication, greater productivity, comfort in a foreign environment, awareness of intensive and extensive listening, and familiarity with accents and dialects. The key means of listening skills enhancement are observed to involve overcoming the barriers to effective listening, implementing the acknowledged listening strategies, and becoming an active listener in a foreign language comprehension. The perspectives of further research are the effective ways of applying the survey outcomes in the national education environment.

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