

Listening Strategies Used by Language Learners

Ibtesam Al Amri

Language learners need to use listening strategies to help them develop their listening skills in the target language. It is the role of the teacher to provide them with varieties of listening tasks and texts and guide them through these tasks to help them discover the most effective strategies for them as individuals.

The aim of this paper is to discuss some listening strategies used by language learners with reference to two research studies.

1. The nature of the listening skill

As defined by Oxford (1993: 206), ‘Listening is a complex, problem solving skill’ and it is ‘more than just perception of the sounds. Listening includes comprehension of meaning bearing words, phrases, clauses, sentences and connected discourse’. She also points out that listening is usually a hard skill to master in one’s own language, let alone in another language.

The main problem with listening seems to be the fact that in real life situations the listeners have no control over the speed of what they are hearing and they cannot go back or ‘rewind’ to listen again, unlike reading. Although in class the listening materials are recorded and can be played again for students to listen again, it is usually under the control of the teacher who declares: ‘*Lets listen again*’, Underwood (1989: 17). Also, because of the speed at which native speakers usually speak, students feel that they cannot keep up with the speaker’s speed and they are lost. Therefore, when the teacher asks the students to listen to the overall message and forget about what they could not catch, which probably means what they did not understand, the teacher has no idea that sometimes what they do not really understand can ‘add up to 75% of what is heard’, Rixon (1986: 37).

2. Possible problems for language learners

As mentioned before, the speed at which native speakers speak creates a problem for the learners mainly because they cannot hear the pronunciation clearly. In order to understand what is being heard, listeners need to make out the sounds and put them into groups to form certain words that they can recognise.

Moreover, Underwood (1989) mentions some other kinds of problems that are directly related to the students themselves. One of the problems, she points out, has to do with the idea that learners have ‘established learning habits’ in the sense that they were encouraged to

understand everything by listening carefully to teachers who probably speak slowly and clearly. Hence, when they fail to understand every word while listening, they stop listening and lose the 'thread', which seems to be the reason for the state of 'panic' and worrying they usually show before and during listening.

Another problem concerns the learners' limited vocabulary in the new language; they can sometimes hear the words clearly, but the problem may occur in understanding the meaning of the words that they do not know.

The previous discussion implies that language learners need some kind of 'tools', not only to help them cope with difficulties and problems that they encounter when listening in the target language, but also to promote their overall language development in that particular skill. These tools are known as 'strategies'.

3. Listening strategies

In a general sense, and as defined by Oxford (1990: 1), 'learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning and they are 'especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement'. Also they facilitate learning to become easy, enjoyable and transferable to new situations. Besides, when they are used effectively they help in developing overall proficiency and greater self-confidence.

It is believed that the use of proper language learning strategies is of great help for the learners to improve their language skills. Although there are many and various learning strategies, Bacon (1992) suggests that learners use different strategies according to their own cognitive styles, their level of proficiency and the type of task they tackle.

In discussing listening strategies, Oxford's (1990) categorization system is followed for organisational purposes. When it is appropriate, there is reference to two research studies.

The first was carried out by Bacon (1992) in listening to authentic texts in Spanish investigating '*how listeners adjust their strategies to the difficulty of the input*', which is judged on the basis of speed, familiarity and the type of information. The same study was carried out with the hypothesis that listeners adjust their strategies according to the listening phase.

The other study was carried out by O'Malley, Chamot and Kupper (1989) who were interested in finding out the differences between the types of strategies used by effective listeners and those used by ineffective listeners.

4. Types of listening strategies

According to Oxford (1990), there are two general types of strategies: *direct strategies* and *indirect strategies*.

4.1. Direct strategies

4.1.1. Compensation strategies

If used successfully, compensation strategies can help the listeners overcome knowledge limitations when they do not hear something clearly or they cannot catch all the words. They can make use of some 'clues' to help them guess the meaning of certain words or pieces of information. Therefore, Oxford (1990) considers these strategies as the tools for 'guessing intelligently' because listeners do not need to hear every word as long as they can guess 'systematically' through using clues such as:

Using linguistic clues: Listeners can use such clues like word order and word stress to facilitate their understanding of what they hear. In order to do so, they need to have sufficient grammatical knowledge of the target language that enables them to fill in the gaps when they listen to 'messy pronunciation',

Using other clues: Some of these clues are related to the type of vocabulary used that listeners need to be familiar with in order to guess what is 'beyond' the language. For example, they can make a good guess about the social status of certain people from the way they are addressed such as "Mrs" and "Miss". Besides, the speaker's tone of voice, which indicates his or her state of mind, makes it possible for the listener to correctly interpret what is heard.

Moreover, knowing the topic that generally 'determines the content of vocabulary items', Brown (1990: 154), helps listeners to guess the meaning of unknown words; they will be searching for a meaning that best fits within the topic 'frame'. As well, listeners can get some useful information from other clues like 'background noise', from which they can guess something about the general situation and have an idea of 'what's going on'.

Furthermore, making connections with background knowledge that includes knowledge of the culture, the topic and the world, proves to be of great help to listeners. According to the findings of the study by Bacon (1992), listeners tend to rely on their knowledge of the world when trying to comprehend a difficult text, probably because it is the main and the source of knowledge that is available to them, from which they can draw some possible logical interpretations.

4.1.2. Cognitive strategies

According to the results of the two research studies, Bacon (1992) and O'Malley et al. (1989), cognitive strategies prove to be the most common type of strategies used by language learners. While Oxford gives a detailed description of all the strategies, Bacon categorises them under two main headings: top-down and bottom-up strategies.

Bottom-up strategies: They are 'text based' strategies because they depend on using clues or evidence from the existing text to understand new information. That includes strategies like repeating some words that the learners hear probably because they seem to be 'key' words as long as they occur more frequently than other words. As well, some listeners tend to break down some unknown 'expressions' into smaller 'meaningful units' and try to make out the whole meaning through understanding the meaning of individual words.

In contrast, listeners can get some information from the text through paying attention to 'intonation' and pauses that help them recognise 'chunks' of words as particular 'speech patterns', each of which carries one piece of information, Rixon (1986: 52).

Top-down strategies: Unlike bottom-up strategies, this type of strategy is thought to be at a higher cognitive level in the sense that it deals with more 'abstract' clues. Thus, listeners using top-down strategies relate what they hear to what they already know which is known as 'schemata knowledge'. This includes previous background knowledge, knowledge of the world and knowledge of discourse. Having such knowledge, listeners can keep up with the listening text because they formulate some 'expectations' as well as 'predictions' before and while listening.

According to Bacon (1992), listeners tend to rely on bottom-up strategies trying to comprehend a difficult text, while they use more top-down strategies with a less difficult one, which seems very logical; listeners can use their previous knowledge as long as they are familiar with the text, but with an unfamiliar one they can make good use of some 'textual clues'.

Generally, the results of the studies, Bacon (1992) as well as O'Malley et al. (1989), show that successful or effective listeners use more top-down strategies compared with less successful or ineffective listeners. Moreover, ineffective listeners are at a disadvantage because they fail to 'elaborate' on what they hear; they are not able to make the connections between what they hear and their own 'personal experiences'.

4.2. Indirect strategies

4.2.1. Metacognitive strategies

These are strategies that help learners 'coordinate their own learning process'.

Identifying the purpose: As is the case in real-life situations, listeners need to set a purpose for listening in order to set the right 'channels' for their attention. Setting a purpose helps them be better prepared before listening because they will probably have a kind of 'mental plan' to follow, which proves to be true for most of the listeners in Bacon's research study.

Self-monitoring: listeners need to be 'self-conscious' while listening to be able to 'monitor' their comprehension. In other words, they can 'monitor' their understanding as they continue listening as long as they can notice their 'errors' or any 'inaccurate' guesses and try to improve on them. Although both successful and less successful listeners used 'monitoring', successful listeners have the advantage of being able to 'revise a hypothesis or choose between alternative interpretations', Bacon (1992: 327).

Self-evaluation: After the listening process is completed, some listeners evaluate their overall comprehension progress and assess how well they have done. Oxford (1990) points out that 'any self-evaluation must take into consideration the difficulty of the situation or the language' and that learners should try to be as specific as possible for an 'accurate evaluation'. This seems to relate to Bacon's research study which shows that 'successful listeners tended to be more realistic in evaluating comprehension, while 'less successful listeners sometimes exhibited a false level of confidence', Bacon (1992: 330).

4.2.2. Social strategies

Language learning is considered to be a 'social activity' rather than an individual one. In learning situations, there are always mixed ability groups within which learners can develop some appropriate strategies for sharing ideas and asking for help.

As listeners, learners can ask for ‘clarification’ when they want the speaker, who could be the teacher, to slow down, repeat or explain something. They can also ask for ‘verification’ to check that they have understood something correctly. As well, learners have the chance to learn from their peers. If they are put into groups to work on a particular listening task, there is a possibility that less successful listeners make use of some of the strategies used by successful listeners as they work together ‘cooperatively’ and observe how their peers manage to ‘succeed’.

4.2.3. Affective strategies

Oxford (1990) argues that ‘the affective side of the learner is one of the biggest influences on language learning success or failure’. Thus, learners need some kind of strategies to help them control, to a certain extent, their emotions, attitudes and values. There are many cases where learners have no problems dealing with ‘technical aspects’ of the language, but they may experience some personal feelings that may suppress their progress. For example, students may perfectly understand a listening text, but they would not be able to perform the listening task successfully if the text is culturally offensive.

Based on the previous discussion, the following points emerge:

1. Most of the strategies are not only to be used by language learners to succeed in doing listening tasks inside the classroom, but they are as well strategies that they can carry out of the ‘classroom context’ to help them be better listeners of the language they learn in ‘real life’ situations.
2. In order to help language learners discover, choose and develop their own ‘effective’ listening strategies, they need to be exposed to varieties of ‘authentic’ listening materials that can provide them with ‘authentic’ examples of real-life situations.
3. There is no such ‘prescribed set’ of listening strategies that language learners have to use in order to be better listeners. In other words, strategies that work best for some learners may not work for others because the type of strategies they use are influenced by factors such as their cognitive abilities, their learning backgrounds and their general learning abilities.

5. Final thoughts

As a language teacher, I need to know the type of listening strategies that my students use. One way to get some information is to advise them to keep a diary and write about what might make listening difficult for them and how they sometimes manage to overcome some

difficulties. Also, after a particular listening task, I can ask them some questions about what they think of the difficulty of the listening text, what makes it difficult for them and if they manage to understand, despite that, what helps them to do so.

I have come to believe more in the use of 'authentic' listening materials to provide the students with opportunities to have a kind of 'natural' listening practice of the language. They have to be trained to get used to listening to the language as it is spoken by native speakers in everyday situations. In order to do so, I need to provide them with as many varieties of listening texts as possible that can expose them to different versions of the spoken language as in real life situations. This will give me the chance to direct their attention to some important features about the spoken language, which they can make use of to increase their listening comprehension.

Although I usually use pair or group work with my students, which works well, I have never used it during the listening lesson. However, I have come to realize that the students could do better if they work cooperatively in pairs or small groups to work on a particular listening task because they generally do better when they work together. One way to do this is to try out some interesting 'jigsaw' listening activities, which can be done in the language lab. In that case, the students need to not only listen and understand their assigned part, but they also need to listen carefully to their peers and try to comprehend the information in order to construct the whole 'picture'.

To conclude, I believe that my task as a teacher is to help my students find out about their own listening strategies. I am convinced that my students do use listening strategies to cope with difficulties, but they are just not aware of that. Therefore, I see my task as a guide to help them be aware and make the most of whatever strategies they use as long as it works for them. This can be done through encouraging them to think aloud and share their ideas in class discussions. After all, the students could come up with different strategies from the ones discussed in this paper, as what works in one context may not necessarily work in another.

References

- Bacon, S. M. 1992. Authentic listening: how learners adjust their strategies to the difficulty of the input. *Hispania*, 75 (1)
- Bacon, S. M. 1992. Phases of listening to authentic input in Spanish: a descriptive study. *Foreign Language Annals*, 25 (4)
- Brown, G.1990. *Listening to spoken English*. Harlow: Longman (2nd edn).

- O'Malley, J. M, A. U. Chamot and L. Kupper. 1989. Listening Comprehension Strategies in Second Language Acquisition. *Applied linguistics*, 10 (4)
- Oxford, R. L. 1990. *Language learning Strategies, what every teacher should know*. London: Heinle & Heinle
- Oxford, R. L. 1993. Research Update on Teaching L2 Listening. *System*, 21 (2)
- Rixon, S. 1986. *Developing Listening Skills*. Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Underwood, Mary. 1989. *Teaching listening*. London: Longman