

A study on crafting a functional framework to develop listening activities among L2 English language learners in tertiary level.

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Abstract

English language teachers across the world have already been employing effective strategies to evolve good pedagogic practices. Still the needs for developing a new robust learning method that will suit the next-generation learning environments exist. Against this general backdrop, this research study takes listening as the learning domain to explore productive ELT practices that would influence language learning positively. To train and assess the listening comprehension skills of learners, current listening comprehension activities found in various text books, language learning software and self-prepared materials by teacher support Test-based Listening activities format. This research study attempts to help teachers transition to a new framework in creating and using listening activities either to augment or replace the traditionally used formats.

Keywords: Listening Skills, ELT Pedagogy, Functional Framework, Learning Strategies.

1. Introduction

English has come to stay as the global language, recognized as the language of business, science, and technology almost in every country in the 21st century, impacting the policies and practices of countries[1][2]. The world of business expects its work-force to possess vital skills to be successful in the professional life. One of the core competencies necessary to any individual, both in Academia and in the Industrial and financial world, is communication skills.[3][4] This has made language policy and planners, administrators of academic institutions, and teachers to incorporate language training, into the curriculum in colleges and universities, to ensure those graduating from educational institutions possess required levels of language fluency. This brings to forefront the need to explore ways of creating next generation instructional designs that incorporate new and effective learning styles and strategies to realize newly defined outcomes. English language teachers across the world have already been employing effective strategies to evolve good pedagogic practices,[5]but there still exists the need for developing a new robust learning method that is suited to next-generation learning environments and that which is capable of augmenting the skills development process of young learners, especially the digital natives and move them beyond the threshold level of proficiency to a highly level of language competency.

One of the important skills that every person in the professional world today needs to have is the ability to understand spoken English, speak in English well, read and understand texts written in English and write in English properly. [6] All international private and government agencies and educational policy and planners across the globe uniformly look at communication skills as one of the key competencies that will help individuals in their pursuit of developing other meta-skills for success in the 21st century. [7]Furthermore, in order to be successful every professional needs to be ready to connect, willing to listen, possess the ability to communicate well using appropriate language styles dependent on individuals, situations and cultures, contribute effectively and politely in interactions, and be aware. The aim of this study is to highlight the importance of

Listening skills and its essential role in the language learning process in helping learners develop language proficiency.

Current listening comprehension activities to train and assess the listening comprehension skills of learners include those designed for Listening for words, listening for details or specific information or Listening to infer or deduce the attitude of the speaker. Also, a closer look at the listening activities available in text books, language learning software and self-prepared materials by teachers all seem to support a Test-based Listening activities format. Keeping this aspect as the pivotal point, this research attempts to present a post method ELT pedagogy focused on with the use listening activities in language learning. The attempt is to reorient teaching pedagogy associated with listening skills development with the intention to help teachers transition to a new process-based approach rather than a product-based approach. The main thrust will be on language proficiency development by creating new type listening activities to augment or replace the traditionally used listening comprehension activities both in the classroom and on digital language learning platforms.

2. Significance of the Study

The aim of this research is to study the use of Listening skills in language learning among L2 learners and the framework that has been governing the creation and use of Listening Activity resources for teaching Communicative English to learners. The objective of this study is to trace the issues related to listening skill in the current ELL scenario and to propose a new framework proposed that will support learners in the future. The purpose is to shift from the conventional vocabulary-meaning oriented Test-based Listening activities to a comprehensive framework for designing and listening Activities that include vocabulary, grammar, meaning and the use of a variety of listening texts based transactional and interactional discourses, authentic and real time situations. The objective also to augment existing practices by bridging the gap that exists in the outcomes released through current practices in designing materials and teaching listening.

2.1 Understanding the Process of Listening

Listening is an active and a demanding process which is intertwined with speaking and it is challenging because it happens in real time. Though in real life the listener while listening to spoken information does draw support from other aspects like visual cues, gestures and sometimes enjoys the benefits of getting clarification or requesting for elaboration, a learner when attempting an listening activity, even using an authentic material from a real-life situation does not have the privileges mentioned above. A look at the process of the flow of communication will help understand the scenario better.[8]

Flow of Communication		Purpose	Speaking Type
Uni – Directional	Monologue	To convey ideas to another person	Intense speaking
Bi-Directional	Dialogue - Transactional	Trying to request information and gather information	Responsive speaking
	Interactional	Trying to share ideas and opinions in turns	Interactional speaking
		Trying to discuss	

Table 1 explains some of the different types in the flow of communication that a listener will encounter while listening and respond suitably by adopting different strategies while trying to gather and retain information(Karthikeyan J ,John Vijayakumar I.S., (2019))

Listening is a very important process in communication as aural inputs aid understanding and interaction. Only in recent times has much importance been given to listening skills in language acquisition and especially in the case of second language learning. Listening according to Rubin[9] is an active, receptive process when listeners understand information through auditory and visual clues. Vandergrift [10] explains listening as a complex process that is involved with the cognitive process of the listener. It is also ascertained by Osada[11] who explains it to be an active, complex process that is mostly ephemeral and linear in nature.

Chastain [12] also considers listening comprehension as the ability to understand the speech of a native speaker at normal speed in unstructured situations. Listening is a cognitive skill that is complex in nature and viewed as a skill that is difficult to learn because it is temporal and also implicit in nature. [13]

Ghaderpanahi[14] refers to Listening as one of the hardest skills to learn because it happens to be the slightest accurate among the four language skills, but happens to be most important one in communication and language progress. Listening is a skill that is vital both in the learning of language and in its use in real time, daily communication [15]. Wipf [16] explains that the complexity of the listening process based on the listener's perspective during which the listener must differentiate between sound, comprehend words and grammatical structures, identify stress and intonation pattern, perceive the tone and intention of the speaker, understand the context and the content and interpret this based on the larger socio-cultural environment.

Rost[17] defines listening, in a very broad sense during when a listener has to understand the speaker is saying (receptive orientation); form the meaning (constructive orientation); respond or react to the speaker (collaborative orientation); and, get involved (transformative orientation). Gardner [18] that considered those who were able to understand others well and work in a collaborative way had high levels of interpersonal intelligence. Listening is a process in which a listener has to deal with what is listened but also to other information that the person already has or knows about. It is an activity involves the process of listening, understanding, recollecting, relating integrating, etc and as a result is a consequence, involves a combination of physical and cognitive process and the process of data in our minds. Listening is a process that happens in five stages place in five stages, that begins with hearing, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and finally ends in responding.[19]

2.2 Different types of Listening

Starting from explaining the philosophy of rationalist tradition that propounded the Information process theory to the exposition of relevance theory, Rost [20] refers to the various types of listening like transactional listening, interactional listening, critical listening and recreational listening that projects not just the linguistic aspect of the skill but in addition the cognitive and social dimensions associated to listening as a skill. Richards [21] differentiates listening based on two aspects of communication, interactional type of listening and a transactional type of listening demands a more specific, accurate exchange of information that is message-oriented and is focussed like listening to a news broadcast or a situational dialogue at a bank or reception counter. Vandergrift and Goh [22] define extensive listening based on three principles: Variety demands that listening texts be as varied as possible and to includes a variety of discourse styles. Also, it is important that learners must be encouraged to select particular listening resources that are not topics that are very familiar to them and also listening texts that are above their proficiency level. Frequency refers to the routine schedule that learners follow in using listening resources in the target language that is manageable and realistic based on their age, ability and time. Repetition is the time a language learner listens to a text and they must be encouraged to listen repeatedly to the same listening text so that the learner becomes familiar with it. This reduces the cognitive overload, and once the learner is familiar with the text the mind can be relieved of the cognitive process of understanding the meaning and will be able to move towards learning the language.

2.3 The Importance of listening

Listening has a skills to be tested has found its place in language texts like Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) a century ago, although in such tests a human speaker delivered the input for the listening activity by reading aloud even until the 1970s when tape recorders and then gradually other technological aids replaced the human being. In many listening tests, listening proficiency is more associated to processing acoustic input, either the acoustic feed produced by a human speaker or by a system [a computer or Audio player]. This draws our attention to the difference that exists between listening to a pre-recorded audio script from the context of an examination to the listening experience that happens in real life situation and the socio-cognitive dimension associated with it. [23]

Golubovskaya, Elena, and Elena Tikhonova [24] share their insights that almost 84% [among a group of 143 students] felt that listening part was the most challenging and unpredictable part of any language testing with a certain part of the listening test being complex and complicated. They have also explained that the whole activity based on various phases of the comprehension process associated to like aspects explained by G. Anderson [25] - perception, parsing and utilization. Guan Xiaoxian&Jin Yan[26] explain the necessity of using interactive listening constructs to achieve test authenticity and quote Anderson and Lynch's [25] perception of looking at listening comprehension as more of a receptive activity with primary focus on

message instead of viewing it from the perspective of an interactional activity with speaker's primary focus on the listener

So, the need to understand the various theoretical aspects of Listening and the effective use of listening strategies of comprehension, be it cognitive, meta-cognitive or socio-affective strategies will help ELT practitioners to understand the needs of listeners in a better way. The teaching of listening activities based on a test-oriented approach in with the emphasis is on mere content-based information processing rather than learning language aspects makes the learning process insufficient.

3. Conventional Listening Activities

Current listening comprehension activities to assess students listening comprehension skills include those designed for Listening for words, listening for details or specific information or Listening to infer or deduce the attitude of the speaker. The response is usually in the form of filling blanks or choosing answers from a given list / or identifying the best option. The questions that are asked demand the listener's attention mostly to phonological or semantic inputs. The use of a random and isolated audio file or video clip removed from their contexts to test the listening comprehension skills of learners, provides no context and very little background information to the listener.

Some of the following aspects are seen to be the common characteristics associated with listening comprehension test:

Use of random audio or video clip is selected and used in the listening comprehension testing activity is a de contextualized text.

In most cases, the listener is not provided with background information on the audio or video clip used for testing.

The questions that are asked demand the listener's attention mostly to phonological or semantic inputs to enable the listener to fill up blanks in a Cloze exercise or choose answers from a given list.

The listening comprehension test is generally more focused on testing the linguistic competency of the learner rather than the communicative competence. The test itself based on the product model type and more based on summative assessment.

Extensive use of situational dialogues for listening skills development

This creates an environment in which the student is not able to get involved in the process and not able to fully appreciate and understand things from a language learning perspective, Though students manage to get good grades while taking a test, the tests are more accuracy oriented rather than fluency oriented and it can be said that such isolated performance are not wholly connected with language proficiency development.

4. The Proposed functional Framework for enhancing Listening Skills

The objective is to design a functional framework for augmenting language learning of entry level college students, especially those pursuing a professional course like engineering, through listening skills. The proposed framework will use real time discourse samples [Conversation / Dialogues] based Listening Strategies. These will include (i) Semantics/Meaning-based Listening (ii) Vocabulary-based Listening (iii) Phonology-based Listening and (iv) Grammar/Syntax-based listening

The various language segments mentioned, along with a combination of sub-sets described above, will each be linked to the other in an interactive way of two combinations: 1. Using different Listening Texts for each segment 2. Using the same text for all the different segments.

The proposed framework will itself be nested into the spectrum of broader frameworks like the Common European Framework of Reference [CEFR] For Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment - Companion Volume With New Descriptors and the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework [CLCF] that offer a well-designed ELT architecture, that can be harnessed to develop skills enhancement through pedagogic principles.

5. The New Framework based Listening Activities

The descriptors defined in the frameworks will be used as referral points to design modules that will develop listening skills of learners and aid language acquisition and also keeping in mind the needs and requirements of the language learning context in India. The aim is to shift from conventional Test-based Listening activities to Learning-based Listening Activities to bridge the gap that exists between actual outcomes and expected or intended outcomes.

The first and foremost aspect is to use real time authentic learning materials that contains casual conversations, presentations, and discussions and discourses that a learner will encounter at school, college, in the work place and in daily social life. Such materials would be carefully chosen from web resources and other personal repository. The content of the listening text will be based on topics of interests identified from the learners' individual perspective from an available list source.

Secondly, essential focus will also be also given to the text of the discourse with a variety of genres, that have specific structures and conventions for effective communication. Listening materials from different genres, like social interactions, news items, scientific presentations, business conversations and reports and a variety of such materials, that contain specific linguistic features and registers will be used to sensitize learners with the variety in texts that commonly are available.

Also, of importance is the variety in discourses that are associated to various knowledge domains like Science, Technology, World Affairs, Sports etc. Furthermore, listening materials that will have presentational, transactional and interactional type of discourses with a variety of inferential texts that include narrative, expository, explanatory, argumentative, instructional ones will be used. The purpose of all these is to bring a paradigm shift in the selection and use of listening materials to provide a resilient learning method that will promote better language acquisition and a richer learning experience.

The new type listening activities take into consideration other features under each of the specific segments:

Semantics/Meaning-based Listening

Direct meaning and implied meaning (b) Global meaning and local meaning

Vocabulary-based Listening

Content words and functional Words (b) Antonyms and synonyms (c) Discourse markers / Linkers (d) Idioms and Phrases (e) Acronyms and abbreviations

Phonology-based Listening and

Stress and Intonation (b) Accent and Tone (c) Reductions, Contractions, Elisions and Ellipses

(iv) Grammar/Syntax-based listening

Sentence Structures based on Sentence types [Assertive - Interrogative - Affirmative Exclamatory - Voice - Direct / Indirect] (b) phrases and Clauses (c) Word Chunks

Some of the modalities or tools to be used include (a) Reading the listening text aloud by a facilitator [student or teacher] before or after the learner's association with the transcript of the listening text (b) Availability of the transcript and the use of sub-titling [if possible even a translation to support pluralistic language learning] (c) Availability of the same listening text with voice over by male/female - native / non-native speaker (d) options for learners to choose content of text (e) Leveraging technology and IT tools like availability of materials on a digital interface like computer system, smart phones, smart devices

6. Conclusion

The creation of new type listening materials is found to adhere the back-processing model in which the process of learning naturally leads to the realization of intended outcomes, that can be measured and quantified. The technique of fixing the expected learning outcome first and then using the reverse process model to create suitable listening task that adhere to communicative and linguistic aspects relating to the CEFR and the CLCF would provide learners and their teachers with a comprehensive functional framework. The framework provides learners the opportunity to acquire language through listening in their pursuit of meta-subject competencies vital for academic excellence and professional development.

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