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Listening: An Overlooked Dimension in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Listening skill is the brick and mortar for language acquisition. Its salient importance in both first and second language learning is undeniable. Hence, the teaching and learning of this skill should be given utmost priority in language classrooms. However, research, teaching and assessment in this field have been under-emphasized until recent decades. This neglect is because we take listening for granted and do not recognize its importance, as most people believe that we acquire it automatically without taking any particular training. The present paper begins with a broad discussion of background on listening research, then discusses why listening is a lost classroom art and ends with the discussion of strategies and techniques that can help make listening mainstream. The paper also establishes a framework for understanding how listening skills can have a positive impact on other language arts wavelengths viz. reading, writing and speaking.
Keywords: Listening, Language skills, Language Acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

Listening is the primary means by which incoming ideas are taken in [1]. It is the first skill we engage in the moment we are born. It is the backbone of language acquisition and development. It is an integral element of first language acquisition and is by no means less important in second language learning [2].

It enables language learners to receive and interact with language input and facilitates the emergence of other language skills [3]. Barker [4] suggests that listening can help students build vocabulary, develop language proficiency, and improve language usage [5]. Students' ability to comprehend written material through reading as well as to express themselves through speaking and written communication are directly related to students' maturity in the listening phase of language development [6].

Listening is a vital skill that must be taught and mastered. Even though all other language skills viz. reading, writing and speaking are essential to development of language proficiency, listening contributes primarily to language expertise [7]. This statement is well supported by the researches done in the field. For instance, Hunsaker, in his study, found that more than three quarters of what children learn in school happens through listening in the classroom [8]. This finding confirmed what Rankin had found in his 1928 study, that people spend 70% of their waking time communicating and that three-fourths of this time was spent in listening and speaking [9]. Closely related to this, is the finding of Wilt's [10] study, which discovered that people listen 45% of the time they spend communicating [11].

From the above stated findings, one may assume that listening skills get considerable attention of both the teachers as well as the researchers the results however, are contrary. Skills of listening have been neglected and have been accorded secondary position in research [12]. Many researches done in the field, including Kavaliauskiene [12], Alam [13], Abedin [14], Stepanoviene [5], confirm that students have a problem in English listening comprehension. Allen [15] found an inverse relation between classroom emphasis on language modes and time people use them. He advocated that students get 12 years of formal training in writing, 6-8 years in reading, 1-2 years in speaking and from 0-1/2 year in listening [11]. All these research findings verify that despite of its importance in language learning, listening skills have long been neglected in EFL programs [16].

When Research in Listening gained Prominence?

Even though it was in 1928 that Rankin found listening to be the most frequently used mode of human communication [17], it was not until the 1940s that researches began to be conducted in listening skills or comprehension [18]. In fact, interest in listening as a separate skill area began in the late 1930s and early 1940s [19]. Sterner's 'skill in listening', published in 1942 for the National Council of Teachers of English, is one of the earliest publications devoted entirely to the

subject [20]. It is pertinent to mention that the 1945 and 1959 editions of the Dictionary of Education neither listed nor defined listening [21]. One of the early definitions of language arts named reading, spelling, speech and handwriting but did not mention listening in the description. Henceforth, only the terms included in the definition received considerable attention of the researchers.

From the mid 1950s to the late 1970s, researchers focused on pedagogical aspect and assessment of listening [18]. The major areas of concern back then were only comprehensive and critical listening [22] with almost no impetus on identification and assessment of specific listening skills. The researches in listening skills and comprehension became fashionable again in 1980s, when Krashen's input theory gained prominence [23]. A little while later, more innovative methods like Hatch's Interaction Model, Chaudron's Intake Model, Asher's Total Physical Response, Gattegno's Silent Way, Curran's Community Language learning, Lozanov's Suggestopedia and Terrell's Natural Approach reinforced the importance of listening over speaking in attaining communicative competence [24]. In a research conducted by Powers [25], when U.S. and Canadian professors of English, computer science, business, engineering, psychology and chemistry were asked to indicate the relative importance of all the four language skills for international students' success in their academic departments, they gave the receptive skills of listening and reading the highest ranking [26].

Listening – Ubiquitous yet Obscure

For most people, the ability to speak a language is synonymous to knowing that language [27]. Hence, schools and teachers these days focus more on sharpening spoken skills of the students. In fact, teaching speaking skill in ELT has become a fad [28]. But in general, speaking cannot be separated from listening. Long and Richards [29] considered listening skill as the other half of oral proficiency. To be communicatively competent we have to respond to various speech acts that involve listening i.e. for successful conversation we need to develop conversational listening skill [30]. Since the elixir of acquiring any language is to gain competence over its input and thus, the importance of listening in ESL setting is undeniable [31].

Krashen, in his input theory, argues that language input is the most essential condition of language acquisition [32] and input here means the second language data that the learners hear [33]. In sync with the above theory, Rost [34] claims that language acquisition never occurs without access to the comprehensible language input. Nunan [35] suggests that listening is the gasoline that fuels the language acquisition process. Educators truly believe that if students learn to speak language, listening will occur simultaneously. However, research on the relationship between listening and speaking suggests that, only if language learners comprehend what they listen to, will speaking develop as a natural process [32, 36]. Listening, therefore, is essential not only as a receptive skill but also to the development of spoken language proficiency. Richards [28] says that providing aural input accelerates language learning. In other words, language learning is dependent on listening as it can connect the learners directly to the target language [37]. The goal of communicative competence can be achieved by putting the horse (listening comprehension) before the cart (oral production) [38].

Well-developed listening skills also provide the foundation for excellent reading and writing skills [39]. Denchant [40] claimed listening has an important effect on the development of competency in reading. Poor listeners tend to be poor readers, while good listeners tend to be good listeners [41]. Definition of reading comprehension, as proposed by Gough and Tunmer [42], clearly indicates the importance of listening in reading comprehension. They assert that reading comprehension is a product of two primary factors – word recognition or the ability to translate printed text into pronounceable words and listening comprehension, the ability to understand text if it is heard.

Different researches done in the field of reading and listening indicate a strong correlation between the two. The correlation between listening and reading between grade 4 and college generally ranges from 0.60 to 0.70 [43]. Ross in one study reported a correlation coefficient of 0.74 [44]. Brown in another found it to be 0.82, 0.76 and 0.77 at various grade levels [45]. Badian [46] and Bergman's [47] researches also maintained a close relationship between listening and reading. Bozorgian [48] in his study on Iranian applicants undertaking International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam demonstrated a high correlation between listening and reading. A strong correlation of listening with overall language proficiency was also maintained. Dechant [49] in his study upheld that listening provides the vocabulary and sentence structure that serve as a foundation for reading. He further stated that listening develops the auditory discrimination skills that are basis for phonetic analysis in reading [40]. Hence, it can be safely concluded that development of listening skills is very crucial to development of reading achievement [50].

Although listening provides a foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development [11], it is treated rather lightly in the applied linguistics research [48]. Studies carried in classroom settings indicate that most of the classroom time is devoted to grammar, reading and vocabulary and hardly anytime is given to listening skills while designing and delivery of lessons [5]. While language learners are often taught

how to plan and draft a composition or deliver an oral presentation, learners are seldom taught how to approach listening or how to manage their listening when attending to spoken texts or messages [3]. Long's study [51] shows that only 2% of total classroom time is spent for the development of listening skill. The same study mentions that though the awareness is growing, the teachers are not giving full attention to the development of their students' listening skill. Synthesizing the findings of pedagogical theories as well as recent and not so recent researches on second language acquisition, it seems logical to conclude that priority should be given to training in listening comprehension over any other dimension [52].

Why is Listening a Lost Classroom Art?

Listening has been identified as a Cinderella skill by Nunan [23], which is always ignored by its elder sister, speaking. A neglect is listening skills directly implies a weak understanding, a frail production of spoken language and an unsatisfactory communicative competence [53]. Hence, it requires more emphasis and time in the teaching learning process [54]. However, much of the language-teaching field takes listening for granted [55]. As Weaver [56] remarked, "after all, listening is neither so dramatic nor so noisy as talking. The talker is the center of attention for all listeners. His behavior is overt and vocal, and he hears and notices his own behavior, whereas listening activity often seems like merely being there – doing nothing."

Traditionally, it was assumed that just as children acquire their mother tongues through listening to daily conversations [57], similarly second language skills could also be acquired naturally without formal instructions [58]. It is, perhaps, the primary nature of listening which has caused many to consider listening as a natural skill, one that is known by everyone and one which does not require teaching [59]. It is because of this reason many teachers believe that listening develops automatically within the process of language learning [60]. Most teachers assume that listening is synonymous to breathing i.e. it is automatic [61]. Another reason teachers may tend to keep listening skills practice to minimum is that unlike practice in speaking, reading and writing, it is often difficult to measure how much students have accomplished [62]. Many students hide their incompetence through nodding and shaking their heads, which gives the impression of understanding even if there is none [31].

Additional challenge in reference to second language learning is that four communicative macro skills viz. reading, writing, speaking and listening are treated separately in language classrooms [48] while there is always an existing interwoven relationship [63]. Another issue to take into account is that "oral texts exist in real time and need to be processed quickly; when the text is over, only a mental representation remains" [64]. In other words, the speaker determines the speed of the spoken discourse and listeners are expected to process and decipher the message at the same speed. Uncontrollability over the speed aggravates the complexity even further. The fact that students need to accomplish all the structural and grammatical obstacles in real time as the message reveals itself makes listening complex, dynamic and fragile [65, 66].

Another most commonly offered rationale for the neglect of listening is the difficulty of teaching listening in the context of large classes with almost no logistical support [53]. Afrin [33] too, affirmed that inappropriate syllabus and insufficient logistic support are the most important factors that contribute to the miserable picture of listening skills in classrooms. One of the important points highlighted by Rahman [67] in his qualitative study is that from teacher's point of view large classroom is a big challenge for conducting listening lesson in class. Ahmed, in his 2011 study, also backed up previous researches when he found that listening skills are ignored in the universities as compared to other skills because overcrowded classes make teaching listening very difficult. Add to this, the fact that instructional materials are often uninspiring, poorly designed and usually under-exploited by course books [68]. To cap it all, faulty curriculum hinders the process of making listening skills a priority. Listening lacks legitimacy due to a lack of agreement on the construct of listening, limited materials in the domain and inadequate research to keep the field current [69]. Janusik and Wolvin [70] argued that listening is not included in the communication curriculum because it has not earned its rightful place in the curriculum.

Furthermore, for listening to be acknowledged as a neglected skill can be attributed to the fact that there is insufficient teachers' training in this area [71]. Funk and Funk [72] maintain that many teachers believe that listening cannot be taught or evaluated. They further argue that some teachers may not have been taught to teach listening and so feel diffident about teaching it [73]. Not having experienced much instruction on effective listening themselves, teachers are not certain how to best teach it [74].

Besides this, many studies conducted in India indicate that usage of mother tongue or vernacular language in English classroom is a biggest barrier in the acquisition of language skills. Visumathi [75] in research titled 'acquisition of the Cinderella skill listening: a case study of learners of engineering in Madurai' through a series of questionnaires and interviews with both students and teachers concluded that teachers misunderstand that their students' listening level is good hence, do not follow any teaching strategy to teach it. Students, on the other hand, were aware of their learning needs but announced that they do not have any exposure to listening to English language. Even in academic settings, they averred, the teachers

are bilingual. A lack of input from teachers accentuates the problem ever further. In another study by Kaur [76], the researcher observed that students commit errors in listening due to a lack of exposure in second language listening and also because they are taught in vernacular languages. As a consequence, students deliberately ignored certain difficult words or the ones that were not pronounced correctly. Last but not the least, since listening comprehension is not included in the final examinations, especially in Indian settings, hence both students and teachers don't care [77].

What Governmental Authorities have to say?

The eye has been favored son of educators whereas the ear has been the neglected child. The ear has been left to shift for itself and the neglected ear functions poorly in a world where it is forced to work overtime [78]. Wang [79] points out that in teaching English in the EFL contexts of Japan, Korea and China listening skill is ignored even in the modern EFL teaching process. India too is not an exception in this case. Many research studies conducted by apex bodies, non-governmental organizations and research scholars indicate gross neglect of all the four wavelengths of language arts, especially listening skills. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in its report on 'teaching of English at primary level in Government schools' found that the state textbooks at level 1 (classes I and II) focus less on listening and speaking skills and hence students do not get to build familiarity with the language [80]. Khan [81] seconded this finding when she claimed that proficiency in language is possible at a very young age i.e. primary education level. Furthermore, NCERT in the same report claimed that in all states, teachers' efforts to develop listening and speaking skills were no where to be seen. Teachers felt that listening and speaking get covered in reading and writing. Only 20% teachers were of the view that it is important to train students in listening and speaking. The remaining 80% thought that English teaching is English writing. Chater [82] made a very pertinent point in this regard where he remarked that it is pointless to provide pupils wide experience in reading, writing, listening and speaking if we only assess their writing.

To keep up with the global pace CBSE, in its flagship program on Continuous and Comprehensive Development (CCE) 2005 proposed education transformation to ensure that our coming generations are well equipped with soft skills and non-cognitive skills besides academic qualifications. A life skills manual, based on ten core life skills identified by World Health Organization, for teachers teaching VI-VIII grades has been developed. These life skills include self-awareness, critical thinking, creative thinking, effective communication, interpersonal skills, managing emotions, coping with stress, empathy, decision-making and problem solving [83]. While there have been dispersed efforts around life skills, focus on curriculum integration and teacher development remains poor (MHRD, n.d.). Although CBSE has identified core life skills as a part of CCE and has produced a life skills manual but there are no such learning standards for social and emotional development nor are teachers equipped to teach for such standard [84]. The efforts are mostly concentrated on general approach to life skills information delivery without a proper context [84].

Furthermore, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), in the year 2010, by introducing assessment of speaking and listening skills (ASL), has taken a leap forward to save listening skills from its miserable plight. However, the teaching pedagogy, rubrics, activities and assessment criteria proposed by CBSE as laid for assessment of listening skills (prescribed in ASL teacher's manual) are meant for grade IX onwards [85]. And as discussed earlier that in teaching and assessment of listening skills, the sooner the better i.e. it must start from grade I onwards. In a recent notification by the same body (CBSE) on uniform system of assessment, examination and report card for classes VI-IX from academic year 2017-18 onwards, an assessment of listening and speaking skills have been highlighted but, no set rubrics or activities have been proposed for the teachers teaching elementary classes. It clearly says, "the language teachers may devise their own methods and parameters for assessment of the languages" [86]. In the absence of any parameters or weighting attached to it, listening continues being ignored in many English programs [87]. From the above research findings it can be safely concluded that listening skills are overlooked and need to be sharpened, for learning won't occur when there is no input [31]. Hence, the need of the hour is to propose, plan and implement an action plan that schools can use to hone the listening skills of its students.

Promoting Pedagogy to make Listening Instruction Mainstream

Having discussed the problems associated with teaching and learning of listening skills in classroom set up, a natural progression is to examine the pedagogies and strategies that need to be put in place for making listening instruction mainstream. The importance of language input, in this regard, is above and beyond anything else for successful second language acquisition [88]. A large pool of research suggests that second language acquisition cannot take place in vacuum without providing exposure to some sort of language input [89]. Keeping everything else constant viz. age, exposure, demographics etc. increased input of the target language in class contributes to lasting better English skills [90]. Hence, the need of offering extra English input, both inside and outside English classes such as in corridors, in morning meetings, in teaching of other subjects etc., is advocated.

Further, it is often said that practice makes a man perfect i.e. the best way to master something is to

do it regularly for an extended length of time. The adage holds true for learning a language too. Time spent on a task is recognized as one of the most reliable predictors of success in second language learning [91]. So, it's safe to say that the more listening practice one gets, the better he will understand the language [92]. To accomplish this goal, the teacher needs to come at the forefront and assume several roles in this process viz. some times of a guide over a controller, some times a designer, yet other times a diagnoser and finally a motivator [93].

As a designer a teacher is expected to design pre-listening, during listening and post-listening activities that aims at teaching listening and not *testing* it. In a normal listening class students listen to the text either read out loud by the teacher or played on an audio device to answer the questions given in the test booklet. Teacher then, evaluates students' comprehension of the passage based on the correctness of their responses. Such an approach indeed is very useful in testing listening comprehension of the students but does a little to help them learn *how* to listen. It is a truism to point out that the technique of asking questions after reading or listening task is a testing technique and not a teaching technique [94]. This calls for what Field [95] called the diagnostic approach to teach listening. Diagnostic approach allows teachers and students to attend to listening difficulties and practice strategies to diminish them (TESOL, n.d.).

From the above paragraph the need of a teacher, as a diagnoser, who can identify listening difficulties and then take measures to correct them, is implicit. At this stage, it is crucial to involve students in discussion, teacher should ask students how they arrived at a certain answer, what prevented them from understanding the text and what could be done to improve their listening facilities. Accordingly, she can follow up with activities that target specific listening problems that emerged during the discussion [96].

From a process perspective, wrong answers become more informative than the right ones, as these help to find out student lapses in comprehension and that where and how understanding broke down [97]. Misunderstanding (wrong answers) can crop up because of varied reasons included pronunciation, unclear context, poor motivation, pace of the speaker, unfamiliarity with the topic etc. To find the precise reason of errors and lapse in communication teacher may jot down all the problems that she observed or identified and then have extended post-listening activities based on these. In such activities reasons can be taken one by one, for instance, initially if the teacher thinks that pronunciation is a problem, she can read the transcript rather than playing it on the audio device. If students still commit the same mistake she can go on moving to another thought reason, unclear context, for example. For this she can offer a brief five-minute pre-listening period to create motivation and establish context. Once the reason is identified, teacher can plan and strategize many micro-lessons accordingly.

Besides this, to design suitable micro-lessons teacher can adjust the complexity of task to match students' level [98]. A beginner's lesson plan may start from simply locating places on map following one-way communication; to filling in the missing information like name, address, telephone number etc. following two-way communication; to complex ones like understanding the general idea of the passage as done in extensive listening tasks. Additionally, the materials presented as listening comprehension must be fun and motivating for students. As Ur [99] advocated, "we must try to avoid boring or over-theoretical subjects, using as far as possible the ones we think our students may be interested in, that may arouse or stimulate them."

Furthermore, teaching listening in crowded classrooms, where the student-teacher ratio ranges from 40:1 or 50:1, can be a taxing affair. According to Bamba [100] large language classes are characterized by common problems including student discipline, engagement in the learning process, difficulties of assessing their knowledge and providing feedback to all. From this, a need for teaching English either in small cohorts or making arrangements within the existing classroom set up is inferred. Teaching in small cohorts indeed, will require more hours, more workforce and many changes in the timetable and this is not possible in a country like in India where population is ever increasing and funds ever decreasing. Hence, amendments in existing seating arrangements are suggested. Seating arrangement impacts student and teachers behavior positively [101]. Teacher should design task in a way that demands group work or working in pairs, the pairing can be done in a way that a high achiever pairs up with a low achiever; similarly in a group task ability grouping can be beneficial i.e. high, average and low achievers can be made to do the task together. This way they get to listen to what their peers think and say about the topic and also learn from them causing a lesser load on the teacher; the teacher in this case assumes the role of a facilitator over a controller.

Additionally, one of the best teaching tools for any skill is modeling [102]. Modeling active listening is a big step towards teaching the skill. If a teacher maintains eye contact with her students; doesn't interrupt while they are speaking; clarifies message by repeating or rephrasing; listens (and not only hears) to her students, she subtly demonstrates to them, what active listening is. And when children have a good listening model to refer to – they are more likely to listen to others [103]. In modeling strategies, the teacher needs to first explain what precisely the strategy is and then tell why it is helpful in a particular case and accordingly plan multiple opportunities for students to

practice these strategies in different listening situations [96].

Implementing all the above stated practices indicate a dire need of teacher training in the field. No level of education can rise above the quality of its teachers [104] hence, higher the level of educational attainment and proficiency of teachers, higher the level of education in the country. A lack of training retards professional growth of the teacher and makes her oblivious to the demands of the time. In this regard, both pre-service and in-service teacher training are recommended. Wherein for pre-service, changes in teacher education curriculum is suggested; in-service training demands for workshops dedicated to imparting strategies and techniques fundamental to teaching listening skills. Both training programs must get to the point that teachers receive explicit training on exactly how to teach listening skills.

Last but not the least, a continual assessment of listening, both at formative and summative levels, is yet another technique that can be used to improve and refine listening skills of students. Due to lack of ongoing assessment of students' performance, teachers are unable to carry out a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity and threat) analysis of their students, which further accentuates the problem of providing apt feedback and remedies. Lastly, assessment must not be a stand-alone activity at odds with teaching and learning; it can be a form of inquiry that accompanies daily practices and interactions [3].

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