

LISTENING IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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In teaching listening comprehension a teacher must be careful not to go to extremes, either by being concerned too exclusively with theories without thinking about their application to teaching, or by obstinately following frozen routines – opening the textbook and explaining new words, playing the recorder, and asking or answering questions. It is essential for a teacher to have an overall understanding of what listening is, why it is difficult for foreign-language learners, and what some solutions may be. This can be regarded as the objective of the article.

Listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary. The evidence that shows why listening is difficult comes mainly from four sources: the message to be listened to, the speaker, the listener, and the physical setting.

Many students find it more difficult to listen to a taped message than to read the same message on a piece of paper because listening passage comes into the ear in the twinkling of an eye, whereas reading material can be read as long as the reader likes. Listeners cannot predict what speakers are going to say, recorded messages cannot be listened to at a slower speed. If listening materials are made up of everyday conversations, they may contain colloquial words/expressions, slang, ungrammatical sentences, which may make it difficult for the listener to understand the meaning.

In ordinary conversation redundant utterances may take the form of repetitions, false starts, re-phrasings, self-corrections, elaborations, tautologies, and apparently meaningless additions such as *I mean* or *you know*. This redundancy is a natural feature of speech and may be either a help or a hindrance, depending on the student's level of knowledge. It may make it more difficult for beginners to understand what the speaker is saying; on the other hand, it may give advanced students more time to "tune in" to the speaker's voice and speech style. Listeners also find it hard to understand speakers with different accents.

Lack of sociocultural, factual, and contextual knowledge of the target language can present an obstacle to comprehension because language is used to express its culture. Foreign-language learners usually devote more time to reading than to listening, and so lack exposure to different kinds of listening materials. Both psychological and physical factors may have a negative effect on perception and interpretation of listening

material. Sometimes it is tiring for students to concentrate on interpreting unfamiliar sounds, words, and sentences for a long period.

If speaking about physical setting problems, noise, including both background noises on the recording and environmental noises, can take the listener's mind off the content of the listening passage. Listening material on tape or radio lacks visual and aural environmental clues. Not seeing the speaker's body language and facial expressions makes it more difficult for the listener to understand the speaker's meaning. Unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality equipment can also interfere with the listener's comprehension.

Not all the problems described above can be overcome. Certain features of the message and the speaker, for instance, are inevitable. But this does not mean that the teacher can do nothing about them. A teacher can at least provide the students with suitable listening materials, background and linguistic knowledge, enabling skills, pleasant classroom conditions, and useful exercises to help them discover effective listening strategies.

Here are some helpful ideas how to overcome difficulties with the message: grade listening materials according to the students' level, and provide authentic materials rather than idealized; design task-oriented exercises to engage the students' interest and help them learn listening skills subconsciously; provide students with different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, TV plays, interviews, etc.; try to find visual aids associated with the listening topics to help students guess or imagine actively.

Such difficulty as 'the speaker' can be overcome with the following useful tips: help students to get used to the acoustic forms of rapid natural speech; make students aware of different native-speaker accents; select short texts with little redundancy for lower-level students and complicated authentic materials with more redundancy for advanced learners.

If speaking about such factor as 'the listener' we can give the following piece of advice: provide background and linguistic knowledge; give and try to get as much feedback as possible; help students develop the skills of listening with anticipation, for specific information, for gist, interpretation, etc., by providing varied tasks and exercises at different levels with different focuses.

We must find out all we can about how listening can be improved and what activities are useful for that and then use this knowledge and these activities in our classroom.

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