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APPROACHES TO TEACHING L2 LISTENING:

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN REAL-LIFE AND CLASSROOM-BASED LISTENING

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Abstract

Although research into second language (L2) listening has identified numerous approaches to developing listening, L2 learners still encounter a multitude of challenges in mastering this language skill. One of the central problems is the dichotomy between listening in classrooms and in real-life situations, which often causes L2 learners' difficulties in achieving effective comprehension. Accordingly, this paper begins with an examination of empirical evidence on some prominent approaches to teaching L2 listening, followed by pinpointing the mismatch between what is taught within the classrooms and what is confronted in actual communication, especially in the contexts of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The paper, then, concludes by putting forward some recommendations for closing the gap in the current L2 listening teaching context.

Keywords: *L2 listening approaches, real-life listening, classroom-based listening*

1. Introduction

Listening development is significant and beneficial for the emergence of other language skills in the early stages of L2 learning (Vandergrift, 1999; Zhang & Shen, 2023). The primacy of listening skills also reflects the natural way of mastering a language. Many attempts have been made to understand the intricacy of the listening process in the case of L2 learners. Specifically, Lynch and Mendelsohn (2010) refer listening to as the process of making meanings of the auditory signal, normally accompanied by other sounds and visual input, with the assistance of relevant prior knowledge and the context of listening. Meanwhile, Flowerdew and Miller (2005) specified eight dimensions that need consideration for the attainment of aural comprehension. They are individualized, cross-cultural, social, affective, contextualized, strategic, intertextual, and critical aspects. Within these aspects of listening, listeners may integrate both bottom-up and top-down processing to deal with the incoming signal efficiently and effectively. Similarly, Field (2009) defined listening based on the level of attentional focus: shallow, medium, deep, and very deep. He argues that how much attention is paid to the incoming signal depends on the learners' goals of listening. Likewise, Rost (2016) describes listening as a cognitive activity encompassing the activation and modification of concepts in the listeners' minds. To achieve an acceptable understanding of the auditory input, the listeners have to initiate the relevant conceptual and linguistic knowledge in the comprehension process. He contends that listeners may navigate from non-understanding, misunderstanding, partial understanding, plausible understanding, and acceptable understanding to complete understanding. This degree is obtained based on listeners' capacity to activate the right amount of appropriate related knowledge to achieve a shared meaning with the interlocutors. Though these researchers approach listening from different perspectives, they all have the common ground that listening is a cognitive, individual, and complex process. For this reason, a wide array of factors have been identified as variables germane to L2 listening success such as background

knowledge and prior experiences (Buck, 1001; Ovilia, 2019), native language (Cutler, 2000), L2 vocabulary knowledge (Vandergrift & Baker, 2018; Zhang & Zhang, 2020), working memory (Brunfaut & Révész, 2015), etc.

Major differences in L2 and L1 listening also contribute to the challenges in mastering L2 listening. According to Winitz (1981), L2 learning may differ from L1 learning in that L2 learners have prior knowledge of a language, an advanced level of cognitive maturity, a set of established social and cultural beliefs, and in some cases, a firm conviction as to how foreign languages are acquired. Meanwhile, for Rost (2016), the main contrast between L1 and L2 acquisition is related to neurolinguistic changes that take place after a first language is learned and subsequent changes in motivation to learn a new language. Despite the similarities between the learning mechanisms of L1 and L2, those disparities require L2 learners to put more investment into their learning process, especially for late L2 learners. This is also the case of acquiring L2 listening skills, which inevitably involve intensive practice, constant effort and strong commitment.

2. Teaching approaches to L2 Listening

2.1.Comprehension-based approach

One of the most common conventional approaches in listening pedagogy is the comprehension-based approach. This method is mainly characterized by a perceptual cycle of listening-answering questions-checking answers (Graham & Santos, 2015; Nguyen & Abbott, 2017; Renandya & Hu, 2018). The sequence tends to focus on the product of listening rather than the process (Porter-Szucs, 2018). Furthermore, Lynch and Mendelsohn (2010) argued that these product-oriented activities, such as multiple-choice and matching questions serve the purpose of taking examinations. In this sense, teaching becomes testing in disguise in the comprehension-based approach because, under these circumstances, listeners mostly receive confirmation of correct answers, explanations for incorrect answers, and clarification of unknown vocabulary. Similarly, as stated by Field (2009), comprehension-based approach puts the emphasis on exposing learners to repeated encounters of series of spoken texts to help them increase their L2 listening experiences, thus becoming more competent listeners. Typically, the teachers walk the students through a set of pre-set questions in advance of listening and then guide them to overcome what they cannot figure out by replaying parts of the recording. Field (2009) stressed that these correct answers do not indicate listening competence because good performance can be obtained thanks to test wise strategies. This approach may benefit listeners regarding the increase in listening exposure to the target language and experience of how to deal with them to achieve understanding. However, for the novice or weak listeners, it is a daunting task to make sense of the input with such a modest amount of classroom-based practice. Moreover, the major weaknesses of this approach lie in the authenticity of listening and the nature of the listening process. Real-life listening is not about testing. Since “listening is a very individual activity in terms of the processes employed and the interpretations reached” (Field, 2009, p. 30), the problems each learner faces during listening are not all the same. In other words, there are variations in the way L2 listeners approach and tackle listening challenges.

2.2 Extensive Approach

Another approach that reflects the nature of listening is the extensive approach. In the extensive approach, learners receive massive exposure to a variety of aural inputs through media for sheer pleasure (Chang, 2018; Stephens, 2011). The underlying assumption is that automatic processing in recognizing spoken texts can be strengthened with substantial amounts of listening. With extensive listening, L2 learners

familiarize themselves with authentic speech containing sounds that are often distorted by phoneme and word variation (Field, 2009). Chang (2018) argued that extensive listening can benefit learners in two manners. First, learners can expand their lexical bank in both visual and aural forms thanks to repeated listening. Second, this meaningful and enjoyable input can augment learners' world knowledge, facilitating their interpretations during listening. What is more, Renandya and Farrell (2011) highlighted that extensive listening is particularly helpful for beginning learners if they wish to improve their automatic processing. They can learn to deal with real-time speech that often carries blurry word boundaries and occurs rapidly and variably. The positive effects of extensive listening on listening progress have been recognized in related literature (Thin & Sa, 2020; Tran & Tran, 2021). These studies suggested that abundant input and consistent practices can enhance listening. Particularly, the listening materials need to be enjoyable and comprehensible to the learners. On top of that, this approach demands considerable time and effort from both teachers and learners to achieve fruitful outcomes.

2.3 Strategy-based Approach

The strategy-based or strategic approach is another listening approach that has received a lot of interest from many scholars. According to this approach, associated strategies of how to listen effectively should be presented explicitly to the students (Mendelsohn, 1998, 2006). In this regard, strategies are described as techniques or devices which a listener may use consciously to manage breakdowns in listening and to enhance comprehension (Rubin, 1975). L2 successful listening involves careful orchestration of these strategies including cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Vandergrift, 2008). From the perspective of this approach, effective strategies used by good listeners can be taught to less successful listeners with the hope that they can improve listening (Vandergrift, 1997, 2003). Extant research has shown that strategies instructions in listening have a positive impact on learners' listening comprehension (Azevedo & Buchweitz, 2015; Graham, 2003; Ngo, 2019; Nguyen, 2020; López, 2017; Siegel, 2015; Yeldham & Gruba, 2016). The findings of these studies indicate that listening strategies should be taught explicitly to learners to maximize the outcomes. It was also reported that learners with larger listening strategies repertoire tend to achieve better aural comprehension. These learners may integrate selective strategies in a balanced manner depending on their characteristics such as level of language proficiency, and background knowledge, to name but a few. For instance, more proficient listeners are inclined to exploit metacognitive strategies (Graham, 2003). Despite these notable benefits, some scholars have shown skepticism toward this approach (Littlejohn, 2008; Ridgway, 2000). These researchers questioned the possibility of performing the listening task and applying conscious strategies simultaneously in the case of less successful L2 listeners. In order to use these strategies consciously and productively and during the listening process, learners need to have a certain level of language proficiency.

Taken together, these peculiar approaches in listening pedagogy have been proven beneficial for L2 learners. However, no consensus on the finest approach was reached among these researchers. One of the main reasons is that the personalized and complex nature of the listening process seems not to be fully acknowledged and respected in those approaches. In particular, the current teaching listening scenarios in the Vietnamese (EFL) context is still test-oriented and classroom-based with the dominance of the teachers, which results in a gap between real-life listening and classroom-based listening. This salient distinction is likely to cause difficulties for listeners in their English communication.

3. Real-life Listening and Classroom-based Listening

In listening, the nature of input has a vital role in affecting the comprehension process and this is also the concern regarding real-life and classroom-based listening. Buck (2001) made a list of important features of spoken texts including phonological modification, accent, prosodic features, speech rate, hesitation and

language comprehension, and discourse structure. Buck (2001) explains that the pronunciation learners encounter in the classroom often differs considerably from that used by real speakers due to phonological changes as a result of assimilation, elision, and intrusion, to name but a few. In addition, the fact that words are pronounced in a non-standard manner with unfamiliar accents may cause problems and disrupt the whole comprehension process. Besides, prosodic features such as stress and intonation embedded in spoken speech also carry a great amount of communicative information. Therefore, limited knowledge or unawareness of these properties may increase the risks of misinterpreting the auditory input. What is more, Buck (2001) asserts that listeners often have a perception that speech in L2 is delivered rapidly due to a lack of automatic processing. Listeners with a low threshold for speech rate are often related to their language proficiency level. Similarly, hesitation phenomena, a common attribute of spoken texts, tend to cause trouble in comprehending speech. This also contributes to the complication of discourse structure in the listening process which may impose a greater cognitive load on the listeners. Overall, these features account for the distinction between listening in the classroom and listening in real-life situations, raising the issue of authentic listening. In this regard, Field (2009) pointed out that the listening sources used inside the classroom are mainly scripted, graded materials and delivered at a reasonable speed. In contrast, listening in the real world is not only interactive but also unpredictable. Listeners need to deal with real-time ephemeral auditory input that is articulated in a diverse, rapid, unscripted manner, to obtain effective comprehension. To make matters worse, the curriculum and syllabus constraints do not guarantee the appropriate amount of listening practice that teachers can provide for learners.

4. Pedagogical suggestions for closing the gap and conclusions

Given the theoretical and practical concerns in the listening pedagogy, the author attempts to make some recommendations for teachers in the EFL contexts with the hope that they can alleviate the listening problems learners are encountering and maximize the listening conditions to develop their listening skills.

First and foremost, understanding the importance of extensive exposure to English as well as the individual nature of the listening process for achieving listening skills is very crucial for both teachers and learners. Keep this in mind, teachers would know how to adequately allocate their teaching time and design appropriate listening tasks. In-class activities should be mainly created for demonstrating how to listen effectively or implement listening strategies, how to get familiar with the diversity of spoken speech, how to select the listening materials for personal improvement, how to navigate based on their listening goals, and how to figure out what listening difficulties they are facing, etc. Such listening know-how would be beneficial for learners in a way that they can develop their autonomous listening independently regardless of the presence of the teacher's guidance. These instructions also lay the foundation for giving students their own listening space for practice beyond the classroom. In addition, teachers play a crucial role in giving students motivation and encouragement to overcome their anxiety and fear of listening. With rapport and mutual communication, teachers can empower students to gain confidence in achieving listening skills which have been considered a daunting challenge for EFL learners.

Regarding out-of-class activities, teachers can build listening tasks integrated with technology to maximize personalized features of constructing meanings among listeners. These listening tasks should be built to meet the student's personal needs, particularly respecting their meaning-making mechanism during the comprehension process. At the earlier stage, the listening practice should be assigned to students as a compulsory requirement in the listening course to cultivate their autonomy. However, in the long run, the listening practice should be designed in a meaningful and practical way so that students start to have the

willingness to complete the tasks without any imposition from the teachers. This is also what students need to develop lifelong learning skills to not only achieve listening but also other language skills successfully.

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