Tasks for Simulating Listening Skills: A Corroborative Learning Experience

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ABSTRACT
Listening is a complex process that can be developed by consistent practice. It is a vital skill providing the basis for successful communication and professional career. Developing good listening skill, therefore, is an integral part of the learning process. Effective listening skill enhances the ability to adapt to new pieces of information and knowledge. It could be developed by involving the learners to approach problems or tasks and come out with their own responses. The aim of the paper is to discuss the tasks for simulating the development of listening skills in the learners. Listening skills could be managed by activating prior knowledge of students, assisting students to organise their learning and by facilitating them to think about their purposes for listening through structured tasks.

Keywords: professional career, effective listening, simulating,

STRUCTURED TASKS

Tasks play a pivotal role in language acquisition. Language learning is achieved by constant practice of the four skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Consistent practice of the four skills enables language learners to acquire the skills. Of the skills, listening is complex and it could be developed by consistent practice. It is a vital skill providing the basis for successful communication and professional careers. Listening is the receptive use of language with the goal to make sense of the speech. The focus of listening is on the meaning/ sense rather than on the language (Cameron 2001). Saricoban (1999) states that listening is the ability to identify and understand the message of the speaker. It is the internal acquisition of the spoken language as input. Listening internalizes the process of interpreting messages. In a classroom, this happens by listening to the teacher, audio visual devices and peer learners.

Listening is the initial stage in learning a language. According to Sharpe (2001) and Linse (2005), the promotion of children's speaking and listening skills is foundational to the development of effective learning in all subjects of the curriculum. Therefore, teachers of ESL/EFL would do well to develop learners' listening skills and equip them with the strategies for effective listening. Ur (1996) emphasizes the importance of including a listening purpose as a pre-set task. The definition of a purpose or a defined goal enables the listener to listen selectively for significant information. Providing the students with some idea of what they are going to hear and what they are asked to do with it helps them succeed in the task. It also raises motivation and interest. Kirsch (2008) states that listening activities should be based on meaningful, appropriate and authentic texts (e.g. a story, a song, or a poem) suitable to the grade levels of the pupils. The learners are simulated to be active during the listening rather than waiting until the end. The listening activity keeps them busy and prevents them from boredom.

Simulation

Tracing the history of simulation and its success in ELT, Sam (1990) has mentioned that simulation "was originally used as a learning technique in business and military training. The outcome of the simulation is of paramount importance". Jones (1982) defines simulation as reality of function in a simulated structured environment. Sam (1990) explains simulation as a "structured set of circumstances that mirror real life and participants act as instructed". In short, simulation is the act of initiating the behaviour of some situation or

some process that are something suitably analogous. Another important characteristic of this teaching technique is that behaviour is not controlled in a simulation and the learners bring to the situation their own skills, experience and knowledge. This infusion of skills, experience and knowledge of learners enrich the learning process and make the academic setting a real life-like situation which is a fundamental conditions for effective and efficient language learning. Livingstone (1983) highlighting this feature stated that simulation is usually a problem-solving activity to which the students bring their own peculiar personalities, distinct experiences and opinions. It involves being oneself or someone else in a simulated real-life situation. Hyland (2009) declared that, "a simulation is a problem driven that occurs in a clearly described realistic situation" (P. 10). There are many kinds of simulations that are used in different fields of knowledge; i.e. the medical simulations, military simulations, flight simulations, marine simulations, computer and educational simulations. The educational and training simulations fall in three categories: a) Live simulations (where real people use simulated equipment in the real world), b) virtual simulations (where real people use simulated equipment in a simulated world or Virtual environment), or c) constructive" simulation (where simulated people use simulated equipment in a simulated environment). Just as Hyland (2009) has put it, "more and more ESOL teachers use simulations because they are an ideal technique in terms of which learners are to use language creatively and communicatively" (p. 3).

Simulations provide a realistic setting for more extensive interaction in which students can get extensive practice. All simulations concentrate on explicit information and require learners to assess and respond to a specified task. Hence, the role of simulation has been much advocated in the realm of ELT (Loui, 2007; Rayan, 2007; Krish, 2001; Maley & Duff, 1982).

Sam (1990) enumerated several benefits of using simulation as a teaching technique in a language classroom. This technique stimulates the learners to be forced to behave in a natural atmosphere that help overcome fears and inhibitions and resultantly simulation activities stimulate authentic learner-to-learner conversational interaction (Richards, 1985). Secondly, it provides rare opportunity for the learners to use language freely and creatively (Sam, 1990 cited in Brumfit, 1983). Thirdly, creating sensitivity and a sense of awareness has been pin-pointed as added benefit to bring the real outside world in the classroom. In this way simulation initiate mental and bodily activity ensuring active participation of all learners. This aspect infuses motivation and incentive to take part in classroom activities. "A break from routine" has been identified as the fifth benefit of using this technique in an ELT class. Sam (1990) has stated that the use of simulation makes the atmosphere in the classroom less formal reducing tension. Finally, simulation prepares language learners for real life and handles real-life unpredictability. Simulation has the ability which prepares the students to react to these extraordinary and unexpected situations and give the students a taste of real life. Having mentioned all the above-mentioned benefits, ELT practitioners could use this technique intelligently and should not use it in isolation but should practice an integrated approach for language teaching. Simulation could be incorporated into regular teaching activities to form a part and parcel of the communicative classroom methodology in ELT classroom.

Listening and Simulation

Language learning involves the conversation between two persons or many. Each conversation is built on the basis of the understanding of the receivers understanding of the speakers words, tone and context. Identifying the sound and its variations is an important task in simulation. In a real context, however, if the speed is very slow, language would not be cohesive. Listeners may not concentrate on what they hear if there is a break. Such halts in speeches interfere with the understanding of the listeners. Hence, the flow of speech is desirable in a listening activity. Learners identify isolated phonemes, single words, the sentences and utterances in the flow of speech because the pronunciation of the isolated phonemes and words are quite different from their pronunciation in fast flow of speech. In short, listening comprises some component skills, that is to say, the skills of discriminating between sounds, recognizing words, identifying grammatical groupings of words, identifying expressions and sets of utterances that act to create meaning, connecting linguistic cues to non-

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linguistic and paralinguistic cues and using background knowledge to predict and later to confirm meaning and recall important words and ideas.

Cognitive psychology and information processing in Psycholinguistics make contrast between two different ways in which human beings analyze and process language as part of comprehension and learning. The first way namely bottom-up uses the information as input to achieve higher level output. Here, the learners connect smaller linguistic units to constitute the larger parts. This is a linear syntagmatic sense relation process in which the listeners get the meanings of utterances automatically in the last stage. This process is text-based where learners depend on the sounds, words and grammar in the message in order to create meaning. The other way, known as the top-down processing, makes use of "high level", non-sensory information to predict or interpret "lower level" information present in the data, which requires learners to go to the listening with their prior knowledge of the topic, context, and type of text as well as the knowledge of language to reconstruct the meaning by using the sounds as clues. The background simulates a set of expectations assisting the listeners to understand what is heard and to proceed with prediction of the subsequent context. Both the bottom-up and the top-down processes belong to the macroscopic view in teaching listening skill. The specific practices for promoting listening skill are as follows:

a) ability to identify and analyze the information to note the sameness and difference

b) training in loud reading and listening

c) discerning the truth from falsehood

d) identifying the information

The aim of the paper is to discuss the role of the tasks for simulating the development of listening skills in the learners.

There are a number of orthodoxies about the teaching of listening skill. These include:

⟩ Using plenty of recorded material. Only audio/ AV tracks may be used. The recordings must be as authentic as possible.

⟩ Preparing the learners for listening by setting the scene - introducing the characters, vocabulary and so on.

⟩ Setting a listening task as part of pre-teaching and directing the listeners to an overall 'gist' of the passage.

⟩ Checking the answers to the task, playing the recording again if necessary.

⟩ Setting further task, or tasks, which may direct the learners to a more detailed understanding.

Psychologists opine that child language acquisition begins when babies learn a language by sound remembrance and sound analogy. Babies begin to learn a language by listening repeatedly to their mother's sounds and then they imitate the sounds until they can use them naturally. Non-native speakers of English also could follow the examples of babies learning their mother tongues through repetition of the sounds. This is the direct process for non - native speakers to learn a language. This process facilitates learners to listen to the typical sounds and imitate them until they could understand them well.

There are many ways of exposure to English language to non-native learners.

1. **Human Aided**: Here, the non-native English language teacher is proficient in pronunciation, stress, intonation and rhythm. S/He is aware of the semantic and syntagmatic peculiarities of English. The teacher is an expert in pronouncing words. Students listen to what the teacher speaks/ reads. In the other human aided way, the teacher is a Britisher. Educated native speakers are good models for non-native language learners.

2. **Human Aided Gadgets**: In the second way, gadgets such as prerecorded audio and video tracks could be used. The teacher plays the tracks and facilitates the learners to listen to the lessons.

English audio and video lessons like www.bbclearningenglish.com are useful. Students repeat the sounds two or three times until they can pronounce them correctly. For advanced learners, top-down processing of listening activities could be stimulated with the aid of the audio scripts and the audio tracks.

Continuous repetition of the actual classroom practices simulates the learners' acquisition of language. Through this technique, students could learn vocabulary, sounds, structures, and some rules of grammar. Repetitive practice of the learnt tasks facilitates language learning.

As an advanced stage, the learners may be accommodated with the native speakers of English via video conferencing and chatting online by virtual simulation. The real objective of this task is to communicate with the native speakers and to improve their English by having conversations with native speakers. This could help them listen to native accents, words, phrases, idioms, intonation and other aspects of the language. The correctness of sentences do not matter much at this stage. In daily spoken English, a number of sounds, phrases and idioms are uttered. The most important benefit is that the learners will feel confident in speaking English with native speakers. This task may be pruned by including a task in the name of specific project. The actual task may be facilitated by dividing the learners into groups of five – six, and the different objectives of the interview are set for each group. Students will go to different sites to satisfy their assigned objectives. Before letting them go out, a conversation for the specific purposes could be practiced in class else students may not be able to communicate with foreigners successfully. The important thing to remember about this technique is that the date and time will have to be fixed ahead. The authenticity of the project and other related work needs to be evaluated and assessed periodically.

To conclude, listening is a complex psychological process. A careful and diligent teacher could possibly utilize the resources available in web, Compact disk and recorded resources in possible ways to enhance the understanding of the situation, topic of the message and the linguistic code of the speaker. Grouping the learner may also increase the rate of listening skill acquisition. Evaluation followed by corrective action also paves the way for augmenting the quick acquisition of Listening skill.

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