



Hearken! A Perspective on Listening Skill

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Abstract: Our former Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once said, ‘The destiny of a nation is shaped in her classrooms.’ True to this statement, the young are the inheritors of tomorrow. Every effort should be made to remind them of their heritage and provide them such guidance and inspiration as may be required, to prepare them to face the future with enthusiasm and confidence.

In the recent years, the need to learn the English Language has become an essential qualification as it is widely spoken in all six continents and it has a strong effect in many regions in which it is not a principal spoken language. To acquire the English language people believe that the four basic skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing – are of immense help. Of these skills, Listening is the prominent one that forms the basis for the remaining skills. Even the Indian classroom is mostly teacher centered and students spend most of their time in listening. Despite the great time one spends in listening the development of listening comprehension is generally neglected and treated as incidental to speaking rather than a foundation for it. Therefore, in the present paper a study has been made on the listening skill and some tasks are suggested to improve their listening comprehension.

Keywords: *Destiny of a classroom, English language skills, listening skill, suggested tasks, listening comprehension*

Our former Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once said, ‘The destiny of a nation is shaped in her classrooms.’ True to this statement, the young are the inheritors of tomorrow. Every effort should be made to remind them of their heritage and provide them such guidance and inspiration as may be required, to prepare them to face the future with enthusiasm and confidence. So, there is a desperate need to learn English language which is widely spoken in all six continents and has had a strong effect in many regions in which it is not a principal spoken language. According to Encyclopedia Britannica,

People who speak English fall into three groups namely, those who have inherited it as their native language; those whose have acquired it as a second language within a society that is largely bilingual; and those who are driven by necessity to use it for some practical purpose – administrative, professional, or educational.

One person in seven of the world’s entire population now belongs to one of these three groups.

To acquire the English language, people believe that the four basic skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing – are of immense help. Of these skills, ‘Listening’ is the basic skill in any language. This precedes all other skills. A child, before becoming able to speak, starts listening to what the people speak around him and attempts to imitate the sound. If the child is deaf, he cannot learn to speak since language is a sound system and systematic order of the sounds makes the comprehension possible. Incoherent sounds do not make any sense. So, the skill of listening is the stepping stone of speaking skill.

But in the educational institutions, more emphasis is given to train writing skills as they need to get through the exam. This is followed by reading and speaking. The least importance is given to 'Listening.' Despite the great time one spends in listening, the average person doesn't listen carefully. The development of listening comprehension among students is generally neglected and treated as incidental to speaking rather than a foundation for it. In the words of Brenda Ueland,

Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. When we really listen to people there is an alternating current, and this recharges us so that we never get tired of each other.

Listening is the absorption of the meaning of words and sentences by the brain. Listening leads to the understanding of facts and ideas. Active listening means a structured way of listening and responding to others. It focuses attention on the speaker. Suspending one's own likes and dislikes are important in order to fully attend to the speaker.

Listening takes place in various situations and for various purposes. We often have to listen to lectures, participate in seminars and workshops where there is a need to learn how to think and respond to what we have listened. We listen to the news and current events through radio and television to understand what is going in and around us. At colleges, students listen to teachers for information. In all areas of life, active listening plays a key role in human communication.

There is a difference between listening and hearing. While the former needs an effort, the latter is an effortless activity. While travelling in a train we hear many sounds without any particular purpose, but we listen to the railway announcements with rapt attention. Even in the classrooms students generally hear what is said but they do not listen. The students should be made to understand that we hear and we forget but when we listen, we listen with purpose and with attention which may retain in our mind for a longer period.

Listening is an art, a fine art. The art of listening is a very difficult thing in reality. It has far great importance.

Nature gave a person two ears but only one tongue, which is a gentle hint that they should listen more than they speak.

Listening is a process involving awareness, reception and perception. Acquiring skills of effective listening is not an easy task. But it is crucial. Carl Rogers remarks,

Listening reflects a basic attitude, about people rather than just a set of skills, not a trait but a skill which can be taught, trained and improved.

Even K. Davis comments

Listening is a conscious, positive act, requiring will power. It is not a simple, passive exposure to sound.

Effective listening requires patience, presence of mind, interest and attitude. It is not an inborn trait or quality, but a skill to be acquired by practice, experience and training. The main reasons for poor listening are lack of clarity, jargon, lack of unity, speed, distractions etc. One has to pay sufficient attention to listening. As M.V. Rodrigues states,

Listening is a process of receiving, interpreting and reacting to the messages received from the sender.

But sometimes the listener fails to understand what he listens due to some physical and psychological factors that affect listening comprehension. Poor listening is one of the barriers to effective communication. Listening demands conscious efforts of interpretation of sounds received by the audio organs, grasping the meaning of the words. It requires attitude and attention to available sound signals and to interpret sound signals cognitively. Unless conscious efforts are put in, the meaning of arbitrary words or symbols cannot be understood. Attention is the rarest and purest form of listening.

It is not always good blaming the other man if he doesn't understand our message. The responsibility is on us to make sure that he does understand. We must, therefore, base our speech not only on what we have to say but also on what the listener wants to hear. We must try to learn not to use difficult words which the listener cannot understand. If we use difficult words the listener doesn't show any interest and switches-off his attention. He even doesn't bother to listen. So we have to avoid jargon, abbreviations, and complex technical phrases.

Lack of motivation and lack of interest to listen are the serious impediments to effective listening. Rejecting the speaker, considering the message or impulse dull or boring or lack of newness or little useful matter etc., are the causes of exhibiting lack of interest. So in order to develop listening comprehension of the students we should come out with some exercises or tasks such as **Predictions, Open-ended Questions, and Summarizing.**

'**Prediction**' is a kind of activity where the students are told an incident or a story with various possible climaxes. They listen to the first part of the narrative and try to predict the latter part. For instance,

Everyman

The Lord God looks down on Everyman from high. He sees that Everyman has forgotten God in his pursuit of richness and pleasure. This displeased God. So he sends his messenger Death to inform Everyman the message that he must go on a long journey; that he must prepare to make his accounting before the Almighty God.

But Everyman is not ready to leave the earth. He even tries to plead with Death by offering him a bribe of thousand pounds to reprieve him. Death refuses by saying that all the riches in the world might be his if he were open to such bribes. Then Everyman inquires whether he will be allowed to return after he has rendered his account or not. Death makes it clear that from the place to which he is going there is no returning. At last, Death says that Everyman may try to find someone to accompany him on his journey.

Everyman first approaches his Friend who enquires the cause of his sadness. He assures that he will do anything for Everyman at the risk of his own life. But when Everyman invites him to join the journey of Death, he promptly disappears. Then Everyman goes to his Relatives. Even they too were not ready to accompany Everyman after learning that it is the journey from which there is no returning and Everyman desires companionship. Everyman approaches his worldly Goods like wealth, beauty, etc. with no better fortune. They assure him that they could only bring him straightway to Hell.

Here we can stop and ask the students who are leftover for Everyman to rescue from this crucial situation. We will give ample time to students to think. Then the students are asked to predict what could have happened. They may think and come out with different conclusions. This kind of activity will develop the listening skills and at the same time creative thinking among the students. This task also uses narrative suspense to force students to listen ahead and hypothesize outcomes.

Another task is '**Open-ended Questions.**' Questions leading to inference and deduction may be asked on the listening text. These require the students to express the implications of what they listened in addition to the possible meaning. Generally, questions which involve recalling the text should be avoided. For example, the students listen to the text from the teacher or through a tape. A story is given here for clear understanding.

"One evening Mr. Rao got back from his office at about 6 o' clock and found that his house had been burgled. His wife was away visiting her parents and there was no one at home. Mrs. Murthy, who lived in the house next door, remembered to have seen two men walking down the road carrying a suitcase. It was eleven in the morning and she was returning from the market. She gave the description of the two men when the police came. One was tall and thin and the other was short and fat. The tall man had a beard and nice black moustache and may be around 28 or 29 years old. The tall man was carrying a suitcase. The other man had a green handkerchief tied round his neck. After narrating the incident, the following questions may be asked.

1. Why did Mr. Rao feel that his house was burgled?
2. What made Mrs. Murthy think that the two men are the suspects?

These questions require students to synthesize sound signals and infer meaning.

‘**Summarizing**’ is another kind of activity that helps the students in improving listening skills. The students listen to the text and understand the important facts and events and summarize them in brief. Note-taking is another summarizing activity. A good listener’s approach is to listen carefully and write down only the important points or leading ideas. The students can be asked to take notes from radio talks and T.V. programmes. This activity transforms the ‘absorption of meaning’ into a physical record which even lead to improving writing skill. The aforesaid are just a few tasks that can be used for developing listening comprehension of the learners.

The students can also be encouraged to listen to English news on radio and television and see English movies and ask them to narrate in the class what they have heard or seen. The speaker may also ask certain questions in the middle of the speech in order to make the listener an active participant rather than just being a passive listener. Thus, both the speaker and listener should realize the importance of listening which is the basis of language learning.

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