

BOTTOM-UP AND TOP-DOWN LISTENING STRATEGIES IN THE CLASSROOM

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The importance of listening is constantly increasing in the modern world, and technological advances in global communication have made listening even more crucial. It is considered to be the very basic language skill, which is consistently interrelated and intervened with the other language skills - speaking, reading and writing. Numerous studies related to listening strategies have been published in the past two decades. This article explores various bottom-up and top-down listening strategies used in the classroom by non-native speakers. One implication of the study for the classroom is that methods of listening instruction should be integrated with activities involving reading, speaking, and writing.

Keywords: *Listening strategies, listening activities, language acquisition, top-down strategies, bottom-up strategies, background knowledge, comprehension.*

Teaching and learning are two major processes underlying the activity of students and teachers nowadays. Today takes great importance to the training of students to teach themselves, their education, equipping them with the skills of independent work with the most advanced methods of learning conscious, sustainable, active and creative. The problems English as a Second Language (ESL) learners face as listeners in classrooms seem different from the ones they encounter when they speak, read, or write in. When it comes to language learning, there are typically four main skills that are commonly referred to as the language skills. They are: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening is a topic that has

relevance to all of us. Regardless of teaching and developing students' listening skill significance, many teachers do not emphasize it enough. Even until the 1970s, there were no textbooks particularly for teaching listening skills in a second language. It was assumed that learners' abilities to comprehend spoken language would automatically improve in an inductive way, through practice. As one of the crucial components of spoken language processing, there is no spoken language without listening. It is also a domain that is interconnected with numerous areas of inquiry and development. Listening is quite relevant in humanities and applied sciences such as linguistics, education, business and law, and in social sciences such as anthropology, political science, psychology and sociology. As White found in his 1998 study, listening can be defined as "*the ability to understand and comprehend spoken language*" [13]. It involves actively listening to spoken words, phrases, and conversations and comprehending their meaning. Rost points out that "*listening refers to a complex process that allows people to comprehend spoken language. Not only is it an essential element of producing effective communication, it also helps people to understand the world*" [9]. According to A. Anderson "*listening, alongside reading, has often been regarded as a passive language skill*" [1, p.6].

It is impossible to have pure listening classes that is, classes in which only the listening skill is practised. This happens because effective listening involves complex processes of recognition/identification, selection, inference, evaluation, etc. This means that the skill is often integrated with speaking or writing.

Speaking is the ability to produce and communicate using spoken language. This skill focuses on expressing oneself verbally, participating in conversations, and conveying ideas, opinions, and information effectively. Reading is regarded as the ability to understand written language. The mentioned skill involves interpreting and comprehending written texts, such as books, articles, and various written materials. Writing is the ability to produce written language. It focuses on expressing thoughts, ideas, and information through writing, including grammar, vocabulary, and organization of written texts. Teachers should set high standards for an ESL classroom during the learning process. They should work to create

all the necessary conditions for students who are *non-native* speakers to learn effectively and reach the desired outcome. For the teaching of English to be successful, the four skills, reading, listening, speaking and writing, should be integrated in an effective way. These skills should be addressed in a way that helps students meet the standards you set for them and develop their communicative competence gradually. Having tried to show how listeners use skills from several levels of linguistic operation simultaneously and in an interrelated way, it may seem strange to raise the question of how they should be taught. Most realistic tasks require students to use several skills together. Getting the main information from a spoken text demands the use of the sound, the vocabulary and the sense of what is being said, as well as the ability to select and combine the relevant information from all the things that have been understood. There is no harm in occasionally isolating features of language found in a listening passage to help students learn more about how the form of the language carries significance. For example, pointing out or doing exercises on the way speakers indicate that they wish to focus on a point is not regarded as integrated skills practice, but it is valuable if it helps students to cope better with what they listen to in future. This remoted piece of knowledge may in time become integrated into their total language competence and become something they no longer need to pay conscious attention to. Because of a wish to discourage a gradual approach to listening on the part of the students themselves such kind of activities are intended to the post-listening phase of the lesson, when the students have already achieved an understanding of the overall message of the passage and are now ready to look back and reflect on language points in it. The main aim in teaching listening is to identify and understand what other people are saying, at normal speed and in normal conditions (listening for comprehension).

Pedagogical objectives in listening could include listening for:

1. discriminating
 - among the distinctive sounds of English;
 - among true/false answers;
2. matching
 - pictures with descriptions;

- words with definitions;
 - parts of sentences placed in different columns;
3. recognizing/identifying
 - meaning conveyed by intonation, stress, pitch of the voice;
 - sounds, words, phrases;
 - categories of words, morphological distinctions;
 - main idea/gist;
 - details/specific information;
 - relevant/irrelevant information;
 - intentions/opinions/attitudes/behaviour/feelings;
 - cohesive devices;
 - discourse markers;
 - word order patterns;
 - registers/styles;
 - context;
 4. re-ordering
 - structures;
 - information;
 5. completing structures/pictures/dialogues;
 6. inferring
 - information/situations/relationships;
 7. checking
 - a specific piece of pre-knowledge against what is said;
 - whether answers are true or false;
 8. interpreting what they hear
 9. interpreting/ guessing the key information contained in the recording before they listen
 10. visualizing elements of what they hear and forming a mental picture that corresponds to that of the speaker [2, p.59-60].

Literature in the field mentions that the strategies involved in the process of direct comprehension of information/material could be of two types:

a) bottom-up strategies - the students start from the smallest units of meaning (sounds, phonemes, words) and go to larger units such as phrases, clauses, sentences, in their process of constructing meaning.

Bottom-up processes include:

- scanning the input to identify familiar lexical items;
- segmenting the stream of speech into constituents;
- using the phonological cues to identify the information focus in an utterance;
- using grammatical cues to organize the input into constituents.

b) top-down strategies - students appeal to prior knowledge (background knowledge) that helps them interpret the listening text/information and anticipate what is to come.

The most used processes include:

- assigning an interaction to part of a particular event, such as storytelling, joking, praying, complaining;
- assigning places, persons or things to categories;
- inferring cause and effect relationships;
- anticipating outcomes;
- inferring the topic of a discourse;
- inferring the sequence between events;
- inferring missing details [2, p.60].

Anderson and Lynch specify that in addition to linguistic skills listeners must have some non-linguistic skills and knowledge, appropriate background purpose for listening knowledge; appropriate social and cultural skills and knowledge; appropriate purpose for listening [1].

In a study published in 2001, Harmer stated that the listening principles take in view the teacher's carefully preparing the listening activity (by discussing the topic in advance), then offering students possibilities to listen to different materials as often and as much as possible, encouraging them not only to listen, but also to work on different tasks related to the listening material. At the same, they imply the teacher exposing students to both - what is called- "*holistic listening*" (listening to the whole text) and "*segmental listening*" (listening to specific segments and working on them) [6].

Taking into account the fact that the listening skill is not acquired automatically and, at the same time, that language learning involves intentional listening, teachers need to teach their students how to do it and how to develop this skill. Students need opportunities to develop also

their reading and writing skills. Developing students' competencies in reading and writing requires exposing students to gradually challenging reading materials and writing tasks. The aim is making students read and write effectively. Listening strategies are some techniques used by listeners consciously while listening to help understanding. If the listeners need the strategies less and less or can use the strategies unconsciously, the strategies have become listening skills. According to Scrivener "*we can classify much of the obvious subject matter of English language teaching under two main headings: language systems (lexis, grammar, function, phonology) and language skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening)*" [10, p.20]. For listening strategies in particular, Rost's definition of "*conscious plans to manage incoming speech*" is employed. Importantly, these definitions encompass top-down strategies (e.g., using contextual clues to work out meaning) but also bottom-up strategies (e.g., attending to intonation patterns, to word prefixes, or to other linguistic features to make meaning more accessible) [8].

In Vizental's study of Strategies of Teaching and Testing English as a Foreign Language, she mentioned that listening involves three main sub-skills: hearing (the ability to recognize the oral message), understanding (the ability to interpret the spoken form of the language) and responding (the ability to react linguistically or non-linguistically to the spoken message) [12, p.124].

Some methodological considerations should be taken into account and they refer to:

- the attitude towards the skill as such: the teacher should develop students' awareness of the listening process by telling them that they do not need to understand everything from the very beginning - as developing the skill means gradual "encounters" with the listening material, under various forms and different situations;

- preparation: the teacher should help students (according to their age, language level and difficulty of the listening material) be prepared for the process of listening; this means that teacher and students discuss about the topic in advance, activating linguistic or background knowledge;

- the material to be used: the teacher should allow students to listen to authentic material (lectures, everyday conversations, songs, TV or ra-

dio news, announcements), graded according to their level and covering a wide range of voices, accents and speaking styles; the use of authentic material guarantees the pragmatic input of the teaching process;

➤ the strategies and techniques to be used: the teacher should choose the strategies and techniques that ensure recognition, comprehension and procession of the material;

➤ the attitude of the teacher: the teacher should encourage students in their attempt of correct decoding of the listening material [2, p.60-61].

Two important processes are involved in listening. Learners who speak English as a Foreign Language (EFL) need to listen to the English language daily if they want to communicate appropriately. [4] The definitions of listening strategies and skills serve as the basis of the understanding of the following part- the major listening strategies in listening classes. White explains that strategies are “*efforts to compensate for uncertainties in understanding, and could include making inferences, realizing where misunderstandings have occurred, and asking for clarification*”. [13, p.7] According to another author, strategies are “*conscious steps or actions by which learners can guide and evaluate their own comprehension and responses*” [8].

When planning a listening lesson, there are three main points that should be taken into considerations:

1) Choosing one of the types of listening experience that you have previously identified as relevant or interesting for your students.

2) Finding exercises that both fit what the passage has to offer and practise skills connected with listening that will be useful for your students.

3) Bringing these exercises together and putting them into a sequence which forms a coherent lesson.

In real-life listening, our students will have to use a combination of the two processes, with more emphasis on top-down or bottom-up listening depending on their reasons for listening. However, the two types of listening can also be practised separately, as the skills involved are quite different. *Top-down listening* uses background knowledge and contextualizes words to aid comprehension. *Bottom-up listening* uses sounds, words, and other small units to create meaning. These processes are com-

plementary; listening for only the big picture but not the details can be as ineffective as trying to understand every single word your lecturer says. Definitely, listening is very important and we have to listen to many utterances in our everyday life; conversations will take place only when we can understand what our interlocutor says; although input (listening and reading) alone is not sufficient for acquisition, input is absolutely necessary for second language learning [11]. Both terms “*bottom-up processing*” and “*top-down processing*” originally came from computer science, and were later introduced to the linguistic field. Bottom-up processing conveys the significance of “*data-driven*”, and top-down processing is known as “*knowledge driven*” in the domain of computer science.

In pedagogical terms, it is possible to draw a distinction between *bottom-up* and *top-down* approaches to listening comprehension. *Bottom-up* listening activities focus learners on the individual elements and building blocks of the language. It is the type of listening when the listener attempts to make sense of the language sound by sound, or word by word, with less use of background knowledge. Decoding oral utterances, discriminating between individual sounds, particularly those with minimal contrasts, and identifying different stress, rhythm and intonation patterns feature prominently in the early stages of learning, and the student is only gradually moved from sound to word to sentence to text [7, p.26]. During the *top-down* listening process strategies, the listener uses background knowledge of the topic to make sense of what he/she is listening to. Thus, the listener already knows a fair amount of information about the topic and he/she is able to relate a story or information into a prior knowledge. In their book on listening, Anderson and Lynch contrast the *bottom-up* view of listener as “**tape recorder**” with the *top-down* view of listener as “**model builder**”. The view of listener as tape recorder suggests that the listener takes in and stores aural messages in much the same way as a tape recorder. However, researches show that this is not the way that listening works [1]. If you ask students to listen to a message and write down as much of the message as they can recall, you will generally find that they have remembered some bits of the message, they have forgotten other bits, and they have added in bits which were not in fact in the message at all. In addition, those bits which are successfully

recalled will not be in the exact words of the original message. It seems that when we comprehend messages, we store the meanings but not the linguistic forms. The alternative to the listener as tape recorder view, that of listener as active model builder, accords a much more active role to listeners as they construct an interpretation of a message by utilising both bottom-up and top-down knowledge. The learners, during the listening process, will need to combine the two listening strategies in real-world listening, setting more emphasis on top-down or bottom-up listening depending on their listening objectives. However, because the two types of listening involve and require very distinct skills, they can also be applied individually in the lesson. But as Brown and Yule point out, friendly casual conversations among native speakers are relatively undemanding on the listener. They are primarily social events. The interlocutors often produce short stock replies which keep the interaction going and add to the general feeling of friendliness, but are relatively informationless [3]. This is because the maintaining of a friendly atmosphere, rather than the exchange of information, is the main reason for this kind of conversation.

CONCLUSIONS

All types of listening skills are valuable and necessary if a learner is to acquire an all-round ability to listen effectively in a range of situations, to various types of input, and for a variety of listening purposes. Bringing the two types of processing in the classroom is essential for effective listening. Successful listening depends on the ability to combine these two types of processing. Activities that focus on each method independently should assist students who are non-native speakers in combining top-down and bottom-up processes to become better listeners in extended real-life situations or longer classroom listenings.

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