

# Teaching '*Listening*' as an '*English Language Skill*'

Mili Saha\*

**Abstract:** Listening skill is elementary for EFL or ESL learners. It is the most frequently used one among the four skills of a language. Beginners of EFL need more listening input than the other learners. Although English has been taught as a foreign language in our country for long, we can overlook neither the contribution of practising listening in order to be successful nor the failure rooted in its absence in teaching or learning English. So, in this essay I have attempted to discuss the essentiality and utility of listening as a skill in the field of ESL or EFL through depicting the form, variety and necessity of listening, as well as strategies and phases of teaching listening formulating.

## Introduction:

English, as I believe, actually acts as a second language in disguise of a foreign language in Bangladesh. It has a greater activity now than in the past. The status of English as the "library language" and the increased "international interdependence" are the two reasons making a greater focus on face-to-face language usage crossing the domain of pen-and-paper exercise. As the decline of Grammar-Translation method in 1960s proved that language learning might not be limited to "reading and writing" or 'literacy', the provisional continuation of Direct Method confirmed too that 'listening and speaking' which is defined as 'oracy' is not all, that language must be taught in an integrative way where all four skills are focused.

But most often, even in the modern methods of SL teaching, quite surprisingly, listening skill is ignored in this way or that! David Nunan (1997) commented that listening is the "Cinderella Skill" which is overlooked by its elder sister "speaking" in SL learning. As the productive skills of speaking and writing are emphasized more, the receptive skills of listening and reading have become the secondary ones. Besides, in our schools, colleges and even in the higher levels, instructors direct how to read and write, not how to speak or listen. It is believed that these would be mastered by the learners automatically. Although listening had a boost up in 1960s (direct method) and in 1980s (Krashen's input hypothesis, 1981; James Asher's Total Physical Response, 1988 and Gillian Brown, 1988), it turned out to be a fashion in most cases!

In this article, I have tried to show how listening helps EFL learners to develop language skills. A small survey has been done at Noakhali Science and

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\* Mili Saha, Lecturer, Department of English, Jagannath University, Dhaka

Technology University in order to demonstrate that listening practice is desired by the learners and they find it functional in language learning.

### What is listening?

Listening is a skill that is related to but distinct from hearing which involves merely perceiving sounds in a passive way. Listening occupies an active and immediate analysis of the streams of sounds. This correlation is like that between seeing and looking. Seeing is a very ordinary and passive state while looking is a focused process requiring the beholder's instrumental approach. Listening has a "volitional component" (Tomatis 2007: 12). His view is that while listening the desire to listen, as well as the capability to listen (comprehension) must be present with the listener for the successful recognition and analysis of the sound.

What 'listening' really means is 'listening and understanding what we hear at the same time'. So, two concurrent actions are demanded to take place in this process. Besides, according to Mecheal Rost (1991) listening comprises some component skills which are:

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

As McDonough and Shaw (1993) and Rost (1991) explain that a listener as a processor of language has to go through three processes using three types of skills:

**a. Processing sound (Perception skills):** As the complete perception doesn't emerge from only the source of sound, listeners have to segment the stream of sound and detect word boundaries, contracted forms, vocabulary, sentence and clause boundaries, stress on longer words and effect on the rest of the words, the significance of intonation and other language-related features, changes in pitch, tone and speed of delivery, word order pattern, grammatical word classes, key words, basic syntactic patterns, cohesive devices etc for that.

**b. Processing meaning (Analysis skills):** It is a very important stage as syntax is lost to memory within a very short time whereas meaning is retained for much longer. Richards (1985:191) says that 'memory works with propositions, not with sentences'. While listening, listeners categorize the received speech into meaningful sections, identify redundant material, keep hold of chunks of the sentences, think ahead and use language data to anticipate what a speaker may be

going to say, accumulate information in the memory by organizing them and avoid too much immediate detail.

**c. Processing knowledge and context (Synthesis skills):** Here, 'context' refers to physical setting, the number of listener and speakers, their roles and their relationship to each other while 'linguistic knowledge' refers to their knowledge of the target language brought to the listening experience. Every context has its individual frame of reference, social attitude and topics. So, members of a particular culture have particular rules of spoken behavior and particular topic which instigate particular understanding. Listening is thought as an 'interplay' between language and brain which requires the listeners to guess, organize and confirm meaning from the context.

However, none of these micro-skills is either used or effective in isolation or is called listening. Successful listening refers to a coordination of the component skills.

### **The Nature of Listening as a skill:**

Besides the division of the skills as 'receptive' and 'productive', another subdivision focuses on 'one-way reception' and 'interactive reception' in this age of active learning. Reading and writing are one-way skills where learners don't get direct feedback. But in speaking and listening, learners may have their understanding and reproduction checked instantly. Thus active-and self-learning takes place.

Moreover, there is a traditional labeling for reading and listening as "passive" skills. But linguists believe that a listener is involved in guessing, anticipating, checking, interpreting, interacting and organizing by associating and accommodating their prior knowledge of meaning and form. Rost (1990) thinks that listeners "co-author" the discourse and they construct it by their responses.

Even as a receptive skill, listening differs greatly with reading. Reading materials are printed and permanent enough where the learners are required to interact with the next sentence using the knowledge of the previous one while listening involves continuous material presentation where they have to respond to the immediate expression. From the view point of "product" or "process," listening is more a process than a product which instantly shapes the understanding and utterances of the learners.

### **Why listening?**

No doubt, listening is the most common communicative activity in daily life. According to Morley (1991: 82), "We can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write."

So, listening as a skill is assuming more and more weight in SL or FL classrooms than ever before. Rost (1994: 141-142) points out that "listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin. Listening is thus fundamental to speaking."

Limited listening input fails to promote face-to-face communication. It cannot shape their social development, confidence and self-image. Adequate listening practice could give the learners essential contact with handy input that might trigger their utterances. Teacher talk or peer- interaction might be the options for this. But according to Rod Ellis (1990), it is not only the exposure to L2 that is enough, and learners need L2 data suited to the accurate stage of their development. If the learners don't have "optimal" exposure in the target language, they can't transmit the "comprehensible input" into "intake" through "production strategies" where learners attempt to use L2 knowledge. Krashen's (1981) view is that "acquisition" takes place as a result of the learner having understood input that is a little beyond the current level of his competence that is 'the i+1 level'. We must take into account that the level of listening input must be higher than the level of language production of the target learners. So, language teaching pedagogy must incorporate academic and designed listening practice exercises.

Obviously listening influences other skills. A theory of Tomatis (2007) shows that "the quality of an individual's listening ability will affect the quality of both their spoken and written language development." He also views that if the sounds of the target language are presented to the learners before presenting them in written form, the ease with which they integrate those sounds will be reflected in their understanding and production of the language. However, a pre-exposure or a following-exposure to listening input is a must on the part of a learner.

It is said that individual's ability to process and analyze the sounds influence their ability to translate the sounds of language into their written form. We know reading is not only a visual process, but it also involves the rapid analysis of letters and words that represents sounds and it is sound which gives the words meaning. A learner can decode the graphic images or recognize their meaning efficiently if their auditory processing skills are well developed. In a similar way, sounds are translated into graphic form in writing and if the sounds are poorly integrated their graphic representation will be hampered and problems like spelling mistakes may arise. So, we see the foundation on which reading and writing skills are built is spoken language, and listening is the fundamental to spoken language as without listening to anything we can't reproduce or reply.

In a learner-centered approach, it is deduced that listening provides the learners with the following features of the target language:

- How the language is organized

- How native speakers use the language
- How to communicate in the language

### Strategies for Listening:

Two types of strategies for listening are in practice. They are defined so according to the ways of processing the text while listening:

**a. In Bottom Up** processing, like reading, learners utilize their linguistic knowledge to identify linguistic elements in an order from the smallest linguistic unit like phonemes (bottom) to the largest one like complete texts (top). They link the smaller units of the language together to form the larger parts and it's a linear process where meaning is derived automatically at the last stage. It is absolutely a "text based" process where learners rely on the sounds, words and grammar in the message in order to create meaning.

**b. Top- down interpretation**, on the other hand, requires learners to go to the listening with their prior knowledge of topic, context, and type of text as well as knowledge of language to reconstruct the meaning using the sounds as clues. "This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that help the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next."

It is assumed that bottom up process is applied while practising minimal pairs, taking pronunciation tests, listening for specific details, recognizing cognates and word-order pattern. On the other hand, top-down interpretation is used in the activities like *listening for the main idea, predicting, drawing inferences, and summarizing* which involves relating what they know and what they hear.

According to the types of situation where understanding takes place, listening is divided into:

**a. Reciprocal or interactive listening** where the listener is required to take part in the interaction and alternately listens and speaks. Interactive listening situations include face-to-face conversations and telephone calls in which listener has a chance to ask for clarification, repetition, or slower speech from conversation partner.

**b. Non-reciprocal or non-interactive listening** occurs when the listener is engaged in listening passively to a monologue or speech or even conversation. Some non-interactive listening situations are listening to the radio, CDs, TV, films, lectures etc. and the listener usually doesn't have the opportunity to ask for clarification, slower speech or repetition here.

We believe this type of listening is not totally non-interactive. The interaction here is 'cognitive' one and students respond through understanding and creating meanings. Besides, this is semi-reciprocal if the instructor makes them respond

while checking their understanding through question-answer, discussion or clarification in the class or lab.

### **Methodology:**

Methods applied for the survey included questionnaire and group interviews taken with 40 students in last January, 2009 who attend listening classes regularly in the language lab. The students were from the 1<sup>st</sup> year 1<sup>st</sup> term of the department of Pharmacy, CSTE, ACCT, and FIMS. Although they were not beginners and had learnt English at their secondary and higher secondary levels, they had no exposure to authentic English speech. They had been practicing listening to audio and video recordings here in a language lab using headphones for the last three months. The purpose of the survey was explained to them and they took 40 minutes to think on the questions and answer them. Data has been analyzed manually.

### **Findings:**

- 30 students claim that *listening practice has raised their confidence and removed their fear, hesitations, inertia and shyness to speak in English that they had before.*
- All of the 40 students have told that watching video clippings and movie while listening *enables them to identify the right responses, reactions, styles, expressions, behaviors, attitudes and emotions in particular situations by concentrating on gesture, body language, non- linguistic cues, planning utterances, adjacency pairs, turn-taking, repairing utterances by asking for repetition, pre-closing and closing.*
- 5 students have said that it *has quickened their planning to respond as they listen to faster speaking.*
- 35 students opine that *exposure to naturally spoken input by native speakers gives them practical experience of using language in target situations.*
- 20 students who are highly motivated have *found a change in their speaking style.*
- 36 students think that listening to dialogues and conversation *enriches their vocabulary and teaches how to use them appropriately.*
- 10 students have found that *intensive listening practice helps them to remember the syntactic structures, spelling, accent and intonation.*
- 19 students mention about *learning of the cultures, trend and customs of the English speaking people and these help them to feel motivated (integrative) to speak English.*
- All of the 40 students opine that *watching movie or video clippings draws more attention during the class and add to their learning.*

- All of the 40 students believe that *interaction with teachers while listening helps them greatly to remove confusion, use their newly gained knowledge immediately and make it regular in use.*

### Teaching listening:

Disappointingly, as we find a very diminutive effort is operative in teaching listening in our classrooms, this discussion may appear redundant to many language teachers! What do we find in a traditional EFL classroom? Most of the classes complete their language course without practicing listening even for a day! Now-a-days very few ELT trained teachers practice listening by reading aloud a written text slowly, once or more so that it is understood and then asking some comprehension questions. It seems the objective here is 'to present the written language in an alternative way', where characteristics of naturally spoken language are totally absent and listening practice doesn't fulfill its prime objective. If the materials used for listening class comply with that in speaking class, it will certainly offer a calculated input to the learners.

Teaching listening requires a bit more on the part of the teacher than that of the learners. One of the main principles of teaching listening, as we believe, should be that "Language material intended to be used for training listening comprehension should never be presented visually first" (Byrnes 319). Good listening lessons go beyond the main listening task itself with related activities before and after the listening. The format may be like the following one:

**a. Pre-listening Stage:** Some activities giving prior knowledge to listening activities before listening may serve as preparation or warm-up. These function as 'reference' and 'framework'. Some recommended pre-listening activities include:

- a. Introducing the topic and assessing their background knowledge of the topic or content of the material. *Commenting on a picture or photograph* is an example of it.
- b. Activating their existing knowledge. *Discussion, Reading through comprehension questions in advance, working out own opinion on a topic, predicting content from the title etc.* can be done.
- c. Clarifying any necessary contextual information and vocabulary to comprehend the text. *Showing pictures maps or graphs* may be helpful.
- d. Informing them of the type of text, their role, purposes of the listening etc. *A short reading passage on a similar topic* might be chosen.

**b. While-Listening Stage:** While listening activities directly relate to the text and listeners are asked to do these during or immediately after listening, so the activities must follow the learners' specific needs, instructional goal, listening purposes and learners' proficiency level. Some specific cares are required in designing while-listening activities:

- a. If the students are asked to provide a written answer after listening, they should have chance to listen to the text more than once. It makes it easier for them to keep concentration while listening with specific purposes.
- b. Writing activities should be to a minimum. As comprehension is the prime target, writing would make the listening more demanding.
- c. Global activities like getting the main idea, topic, setting, summary that focus on the content and forms of the text should be given more so that listeners are guided through the text.
- d. More questions should be set up in order to focus student's attention on the crucial elements that might help to comprehend the text.
- e. Predicting activities before listening should be attached so that students can monitor their comprehension as they listen.
- f. Immediate feedback has to be given to facilitate the students to examine their responses.

While-Listening activities may vary according to their purposes and objectives. Five major distinctions include *Attentive listening*, *Extensive listening*, *Intensive listening*, *Selective listening* and *Interactive listening*.

#### **Attentive listening:**

It is true that attentiveness is a prior condition for understanding, but the listener's concentration span often falters. Losing interest, inability to keep up with, or losing track of the argument, lack of confidence are some of the reasons for faltering attention. Teacher can help the listeners to hold their attention by personalizing the material, using the target language while talking to them to keep the flow as well as reduce their stress and ask oral responses repeatedly to motivate them. Activities in this stage would be interesting and easy including face to face interaction, using visual and tangible topics, clear description of the listening procedure etc. These ensure minimum use of written language and immediate or ongoing responses so that learners can easily keep pace with the text and activity.

*Listening to short chunks, music image, personal stories, teacher-talk, small question- answer, and interview etc may be applied in this stage.*

#### **Extensive listening:**

This type of listening has a greater ease too as it encourages overall comprehension of a text and never requires learners to follow every word and understand them. Learners need to comprehend the text as a whole and it is called global understanding. Activities in this section must be chosen in terms with the proficiency level of the listeners.

At the lower level they may have problems to organize the information. So some

non-verbal forms of responding might be given such as *putting pictures in a right sequence, following directions on a map, checking of items in a photograph, completing a grid, chart or timetable etc.*

At the developed stage, some language based tasks requiring constructing meaning, inferring decisions, interpreting text and understanding gist are usually recommended. *Completing cloze exercises or giving one or two word answers, multiple choices, predicting the next utterances, forming connected sets of notes, inferring opinions, or interpreting parts of the text are some samples.*

#### **Intensive listening:**

'Hearing clearly' is also a prime aspect of listening as it includes accurate perception without which processing meaning becomes very difficult. Listening intensively is quite essential to understand both the lexical and grammatical units (language form) of the text which lead to form meaning. Intensive listening involves attention to specific items of language, sound or factual detail such as words, phrase, grammatical units, pragmatic units, sound changes (vowel reduction and consonant assimilation), stress, intonation and pauses etc. Feedback on accuracy and repetition by the teacher support success.

*Paraphrasing, remembering specific words and sequences, filling gaps with missing words, identifying numbers and letters, picking out particular facts, discriminating the pronunciation of same phoneme in different positions, replacing words, finding stress and boundaries, distinguishing between formal and informal registers, checking off items in a list are some good intensive listening exercises.*

#### **Selective listening:**

It involves listening to a selected part of a text, as its name suggests, with the aim of predicting information and selecting 'cues' surrounding information. Thus, the listeners may have an assessment of their development in listening to authentic language. Here the focus is on the main parts of the discourse and listeners construct the meaning of whole of the text through inferring from these parts. As understanding is the purpose in these activities, listeners should have the chance of second listening to check it and have feedback repeatedly.

*Listening to sound sequences, documentary, story maps, incomplete monologues, conversation cues and topic listening are examples of selective listening.*

#### **Interactive listening:**

This is the most advanced stage of listening practice because it implies social interaction in small groups which is a 'true test' of listening. In interactive listening, learners receive new information and identify them continuously either

in pairs or in groups. Besides, they have to work out the problems of understanding each other and devise responses instantaneously as we are required to do in real life. So, in spite of being called 'practice', this goes beyond. This phase directly promotes speaking skill by involving both comprehension and production. Teachers have a central role in this stage. They have to set up specific goals so that learners can assess their own performance and observe learners' language in order to provide immediate feedback on their interaction strategies.

*Group survey, self introductions, short speeches, chatting and discussing, exchanging news and views, interviewing and being interviewed etc.* might be appropriate here.

c. **After-listening Stage:** Post-listening activities are used to check comprehension, evaluate listening skill, use of listening strategies as well as use of the knowledge gained to other contexts. So, these are not called listening exercises at all and defined as 'follow-up works.' The features of these activities are:

- a. Related to pre-listening activities, such as *predicting*.
- b. Create a real life situation where students might be asked to use knowledge gained through listening.
- c. Extend the topic and help the students remember new vocabulary.

*Using notes made while listening in order to write a summary, reading a related text, doing a role play, writing on the same theme, studying new grammatical structures, practicing pronunciation, discussion group, craft project etc.* are some post-listening activities.

#### **Variables affecting and effecting successful listening:**

**Noise:** Distractions and noise during the listening segment should be reduced and sound-proof language lab is perfect for this purpose.

**Equipment:** If the cassette player or CD player used does not produce acceptable sound quality, it may harm developing skill or motivation.

**Repetition:** Playing the text 2-3 times might be required in respect of the types of texts. In case of no chance of repetition, learners may become anxious about catching it all the first time and that will impede their actual performance.

#### **Content:**

It is a strong variable to be able to make difference in developing a skill. The material should be interesting and appropriate for the class level in topic, speed and vocabulary. Some guidelines for judging the relative ease or difficulty of a

listening text for a particular purpose or particular group of students are given below.

- a. The selected material must be relevant to student's real life; language of the text should be authentic and should vary in terms of learners' interest and age group.
- b. The storyline, narrative, or instruction should confirm common expectation in organization. It may contain main idea, details, and examples. An informative title might also be helpful.
- c. Learners have to be familiar with the topic. They might feel major comprehension difficulties because of misapplication of background knowledge due to cultural differences.
- d. For the beginners, the language of listening text should discard redundancy while in the higher proficiency level students may benefit from unneeded language.
- e. If the text involves more than one individual, the differences between them should be marked conspicuously. This can make the comprehension easy.
- f. Most texts should have visual supports like clippings, maps, diagrams, pictures or images in video that contextualize the listening input and provide clues to meaning in order to aid their interpretation.

**Recording tape:**

Any way, recording must be of a native speaker. Copying recording two to three times is preferred in order to avoid rewinding while listening, because this may distract attention of the listeners.

**Using video:**

Using video clippings with sound off and then asking students what dialogue is taking place is a good practice. Next, the teacher may play sound and check their understanding and interpret them about the discrepancy between their predictions and reality. It may also be done with the video first and giving only sound to guess what the context is can obviously effect grasping meaning.

**Homework:**

In teaching listening, homework is a must. A listening task between two classes prevents them from forgetting. Encouraging public listening and having notes on them is a free path to walk in teaching listening which leads to easy success. Providing tape recording with questions, dictation, or a worksheet to be completed may bring the expected results.

**Using internet:**

If learners have opportunity to use a computer with internet access and headphones or speakers, teacher may direct them toward some listening practice sites and home works can also be assigned from these accesses.

**Limitations of the essay:**

This essay does not focus on every aspect of teaching or developing listening skill; rather it focuses mainly on the necessity and functions of listening input in learning a foreign or second language. The survey also reflects on the service of listening to the EFL learners who are instrumentally motivated. The context of this essay is Bangladesh, though it reflects that of some other countries where the features do not vary much.

**Conclusion:**

According to Wilge M. Rivers (1968), 'Speaking does not of itself constitute communication unless what is said is comprehended by another person'. Listening provides the aural input that serves as the stimuli for language acquisition and makes the learners interact in spoken communication. So, we strongly recommend that language instructors should help the learners to be introduced with native speaking, to be respondent to that both cognitively and orally. They have to take initiatives to overcome all the existing drawbacks like insufficient logistic support or limited curriculum or syllabus in their institutions in order to complete.

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