

LISTENING :

A PRIORITY FOR SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

Understanding what is being spoken is undoubtedly the most useful skill for students of a foreign language. It is easy to see that if one cannot understand what has been said, it is impossible to respond intelligently. In order to understand, you must get the message the speaker is trying to convey — the intention and the nuances — and this needs to be done accurately and almost instantly. To do this successfully, the listener requires a certain level of knowledge and thinking ability. If the listener has been reasonably able to grasp the meaning of what has been said, then it is not unduly difficult to respond even if this is done in a simple way.

Hearing or Listening?

To hear does not take any conscious effort, but to listen one must pay attention to the speaker, to make a conscious effort to understand what is being said and why. If you cannot understand the speaker, you cannot respond appropriately.

Have you not often heard the words “Sorry, I can’t hear” or “I didn’t hear” when questioning a student about an audio segment that had just been presented in class? Teachers new to the classroom here in Japan, could easily be forgiven for suspecting that there may be a major hearing deficiency easily overcome by turning up the volume on the classroom cassette recorder or by raising one’s voice. However, on more careful probing, it is soon discovered that the students are not having hearing difficulties, but listening difficulties.

Expressing listening as hearing is a serious mistake which should be corrected. Hearing is substantially different from listening, and it is the latter which is of greater importance in the context of the communicative English classroom. To gain the ability to communicate in English, the Japanese student should be aware that understanding what is heard is probably the most important skill to be acquired before reasonable communication can be achieved.

Morely (1984) noted:

Listening is the most frequently employed skill in daily language use. Research results vary slightly, depending upon the group studied, but on the average, time spent in communicating divides into approximately 50 percent listening, 25 percent speaking, 15 percent reading, and 10 percent writing.

Listening's Role in Successful Communication

Successful verbal communication must begin with listening. A conversation cannot be successfully undertaken without the ability to listen. Therefore, a certain degree of listening competence is needed before one can truly experience real communication. As teachers of communicative English skills, our primary objective should be to assist students in developing their listening ability.

Listening should, in fact, be considered at least as important as speaking. However, many teachers and students equate foreign language competence with the ability to speak it. Should not more emphasis be placed on a student's ability to listen and comprehend rather than to speak? Improving listening comprehension before pushing speaking skills, would surely help those who are really trying to get ahead in the acquisition of a foreign language.

Rost (1991) proposes general guidelines for the classroom teacher in assisting students in developing their listening skills.

1. Talk to your students in English. Talk to all of your students — not just the better English speakers. Make English a vital language for communication. Personalise the classroom: get to know your students through talking with them about topics of mutual interest.

In the classroom, teachers should consider the age and background of their students and focus on a topic known to be of current interest to the target group. For example music awards, sports events such as World Cup Soccer or popular films and celebrities.

It is imperative that all students be included in some portion of the discussion even those lowest-level learners. It is a waste of valuable class time to try to discuss a topic which is of little or no interest to the language learners.

Rost continues:

2. Make English the language of your classroom. Give opportunities in class for the

students to *exchange ideas* with each other in English. Point out to them how they are becoming confident and effective *users* of English.

One effective way to achieve this end, is to allow students to discuss relationship problems and to give each other advice on suitable solutions. Student-generated topics provide the basis for meaningful group discussion. The teacher could join a group and offer ideas and opinions, thereby providing the students with a native English model relevant to their chosen topic of discussion. In addition, a teacher's role as a group member demonstrates to the students that they can effectively communicate in English. It is extremely important for a teacher to remember that every simple act of successful communication builds a student's confidence and reduces potential future anxiety, thus lowering the affective filter associated with Krashen's monitor model of second language development (see Krashen 1982).

The third suggestion Rost gives is:

3. Introduce your class to other speakers of English — personally or through use of video and audio tapes. Expose them to different types of people and situations. Above all, encourage them to listen to understand things that are important to them.

The teacher should search for student-friendly materials in different varieties of English spoken around the world, not only British and American English. One popular source is Cable TV which often relays programs and news segments in which English speakers from all over the world give interviews and local opinions. Especially effective as role models are well-known Japanese people seen on TV giving interviews, performances and comments in English. In addition, there is an abundance of commercially produced audio materials readily available which incorporate a multitude of accents, styles and dialects.

Exposing students to young speakers of English from less familiar countries, stimulates their interest in countries and cultures which, until that encounter, were known only by name. A desire to know, and an intent interest in the answer, gives these young language learners a reason to listen and, in time, to understand. One recently introduced and effective way to achieve this end, is for schools to set up "Chat Rooms" where foreign students from a wide range of countries are available to talk with English language learners in an informal, friendly and comfortable atmosphere.

A teacher could easily make tapes, tailor-made to the interests of the target group.

Students could be assigned regular TV/radio broadcasts to listen to and then asked to present a summary of it to other members of the class.

Rost's final suggestion is:

4. Encourage the learners to become independent, to seek out listening opportunities on their own *outside of the classroom*. Help them to identify ways of using English language media (TV and radio broadcasts, video tapes). Set up a self-access listening and learning centre. Help your students to develop self-study listening programmes and goals.

In class, the teacher should encourage students to share the listening opportunities they have found since the previous class session and request comments from other members of the class. Each student could set-up a journal of 'listening opportunities' and how they were accomplished. They could then self-evaluate their degree of success and ask for peer opinions and perhaps ways of improving the task in the future.

Some ways that have been reported are spending time in English conversation coffee shops, joining bus tours conducted in English and, using English language headphones at various public places such as art galleries and cultural performances.

Audio books may also provide students with an interesting listening opportunity while traveling to and from school. Recently students have reported listening to tapes of the stories in the *Harry Potter* series.

Fluency versus Accuracy

In almost all situations, a foreign language student will be more successful if the student can utter a simple but grammatically impaired response rather than a complicated and memorized jumble of textbook words. The latter case would clearly show the student had 'studied well' but may not necessarily prove there was any real understanding of what had been said. Finocchiaro (1982) wrote:

"The world, our countries, our communities will survive with faulty pronunciation and less than perfect grammar, but can we be sure they will continue to survive without real communication, without a spirit of community, indeed without real *communion* among peoples? Part of the answer lies in the hands of everyone in our profession. Seeking the truth to that answer is a challenge we cannot, we dare not, refuse to accept."

Yet we work in a system which grades students on their ability to memorize thousands of, often useless, words and expressions which have little place in the daily conversation of most foreign language learners.

Throughout junior and senior high school, students suffer classes filled with grammar, translations and memory tests. Japanese English teachers rarely speak to their students in English. Listening texts are stilted and often nothing like the real English students are likely to encounter in daily life situations. Students are tested on their listening ability with multiple choice questions in which, more often than not, one of the answers can be clearly determined by reading the options. This might have a place in the 'true beginner' classroom as a confidence builder, but has little practical use at later stages of learning. After years of listening to the teacher explaining the use of obsolete grammar, suffering through extremely boring reading topics, and regular memory word tests, it is not surprising that the acquisition of English becomes a much disliked chore to all but those who are motivated by a personal goal to succeed in English language proficiency.

There is no disputing the fact that grammar, reading and writing skills are of great importance in the acquisition of a foreign language. However, there is reason to believe that the current system may indeed be topsy-turvy.

Look at how we learned to verbally communicate in our native language — it was most probably accomplished before we knew how to read or write. In fact, studies have shown that, even as early as in the womb, babies' exposure to their mothers' voices, has a great influence on the development of their verbal language skills.

Childs (2003), in his discussion of what he calls the "attractor theory", states the following:

"Typically, language learning begins before birth. For about three months prior to birth, the baby's ears and neural processes for hearing are already in action. The mother's voice is heard well. Immediately after birth, a baby knows (and prefers) its mother's voice, her languages, and even the stories and songs she read and sang. This prenatal learning gives newborn babies a lifetime advantage at hearing (and of course speaking) their mother's languages."

Conclusion

The development of basic language skills begins with listening. According to Krashen (1985), comprehensible input is necessary for successful language acquisition. Krashen says:

“The Input Hypothesis claims that humans acquire language in only one way — by understanding messages, or by receiving ‘comprehensible input’.”

In *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) refer to Krashen’s Input Theory (1982):

Comprehension is necessary, Krashen believes, in order for the input to become *intake*, i.e. data taken in or assimilated by the learner and used by the learner to promote IL. development.

Interlanguage (IL) is defined by Richards, Platt and Platt (1985) as the type of language produced by second- and foreign-language learners who are in the process of learning a language.

By learning to understand what was being said to us in a particular situation, we also learned the appropriate way to respond. Reading and writing skills came later. Yet, why do we insist on expecting foreign language learners to acquire a language in reverse? Surely, following the natural way would be better. It is true, that the innate ability we have to learn languages, fades as we age, but perhaps there is still some value in giving ‘nature’s way’ a fair chance in the earlier stages of second language acquisition.

As a continuous stream of Japanese students, downtrodden and defeated, after more than 6 years of stressful, often boring, study, just give up the dream of mastering the English language, would it not be worth a try?

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