
Potential difficulties in listening comprehension

Khodjayeva Nodira Tursunova
Termez state university Uzbekistan

Developing students' listening skills is fundamental to their progress in acquiring the language. However, listening classes are often difficult and even boring for students because the listening piece itself is not interesting for them or, because teachers expect them to hear everything and answer lots of questions. It becomes stressful, instead of enjoyable. In order not to face this difficulty teachers need to recreate the motivation that engages all the students in the topic and really make them want to listen.

According to Vandergrift listening comprehension is "a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance". [1] Thus, listening comprehension involves a great deal of mental activity on the part of the listener. Vandergrift's definition indicates that listening comprehension involves bottom-up and top-down processing of incoming speech.

For Rost, listening comprehension encompasses receptive, constructive, and interpretive aspects of cognition. Therefore, listening comprehension is "a complex cognitive process that allows a person to understand spoken language". [2]

Further, Caldwell asserted that comprehension is an unobservable process which is extremely complicated and multifaceted entity. So, he defined listening comprehension as "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction with oral language". Based on the above definitions the present study researcher defined listening comprehension as "a complex process in which listeners have the ability to use information in the auditory text to guess meaning of new items; predict outcomes; understand meaning; find the specific facts, or information; and determine the central thought represented in the text". [3]

Underwood outlines seven potential problems that could hinder listening comprehension.

First, the speed of delivery is beyond the control of listeners. Underwood says, "Many language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension, as opposed to reading comprehension, is that listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks". [4]

Second, it is not always possible for learners to have words repeated. This is a major problem in learning situations. In the classroom, it is the teacher who decides whether or not a recording or a section of recording needs to be replayed. It is "hard for the teacher to judge whether or not the students have understood any particular section of what they have heard".

Third, the small size of the learner vocabulary frequently impedes listening comprehension. The speaker does not always use words the listener knows. Sometimes when listeners encounter a new word, they stop to figure out the meaning of that word, and they therefore, miss the next part of the speech.

Fourth, listeners may not recognize the signals that the speaker is using to move from one point to another, give an example, or repeat a point. Discourse markers which are utilized in formal situations (i.e., firstly, and after that) are relatively clear to listeners. However, in informal situations, signals such as gestures, increased loudness, or a clear change of pitch are very ambiguous, especially to L2 learners.

Fifth, it can be very challenging for listeners to concentrate in a foreign language. It is generally known that in listening, even a slight break or a wander in attention can impede comprehension. When the topic of the listening passage is interesting, it can be easier for listeners to concentrate and follow the passage; however, students sometimes feel that listening is very challenging even when they are interesting in the topic because it requires a lot of effort to figure out the meaning intended by the speaker.

In order to overcome these listening comprehension problems, learners need to develop techniques known as "listening strategies. These strategies are mental processes that enable learners comprehend the aural text despite their lack of knowledge. Listening strategies include inferring, elaboration, and regulating and monitoring comprehension, and they are discussed in detail in the third section.

Bibliography

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