



## ACQUISITION OF SKILLS FOR LISTENING COMPREHENSION: BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS



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### ABSTRACT

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Listening is more often a neglected skill though there are some prevalent assumptions that reading and listening should be given same treatment and similar texts can be used to teach both the skills. However, the question of *visibility* of the speaker in listening activity and *inconsistency*<sup>1</sup> in teaching methods has led to controversy amongst theorists and test makers in terms of finding better facilitation for effective listening work. Jeremy Harmer, one of the most influential theorists in ELT argues that 'listening as a skill may be extremely similar to reading, but the text the listener has to deal with is considerably different from the written one. Most obviously, a listener cannot look at what he is trying to hear; he can only listen to it whereas the written word stays on the page and can be looked at more than once, the spoken word, unless recorded on tape or record cannot be repeated' (1983: 175-176). Having focused on some of the recent theories and the universal barriers to listening comprehension, this paper aims at finding out plausible solutions to help foreign language listeners overcome their problems.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The problems which L2 learners often encounter in comprehending listening has been left unresolved or half-resolved by researchers and instructors; and most researchers, to date, have not accentuated the fact that teaching and testing are closely interrelated and they feed into each other. Researcher J. B Heaton believes that:

Both testing and teaching are so closely interrelated that it is virtually impossible to work in either field but so many examinations led to a separation of testing from teaching. '... any changes in the pattern of testing or measuring candidates' actual performance in the language would have positive impact on learning' (1983).

So, the testing system should have a catalyzing effect on teaching pedagogy. Yet, Jeremy Harmer argues that '...if we are trying to encourage students to improve their receptive skills, testing them will not be an appropriate way of accomplishing this' (2007). So, it can be said that the fear of taking test may affect students' learning. Hence, it is argued that the traditional examination may supply us very little about students' ability to handle the target language, although it may give some indication of the students' ability in some of the skills (Heaton, 1983).

**2. POSSIBLE BARRIERS: A REVIEW**

The activity of listening is *seemingly*<sup>2</sup> different from other two skills, writing and reading. Reading, unlike listening, is written and a reader can see grammatical components staying on page. If a learner misses some words at first reading, there is scope for him to go back and forth to recollect information. As tape and video are available, most teachers use them in teaching and testing; however, they have some disadvantages as well (Harmer, 2007). Harmer is not wrong saying that a spontaneous conversation on tape is generally not very organized (Harmer, 1983). In other words, normal conversation is full of *redundancy* which is often unnecessary for conveying intended meaning of the speaker and foreign learners are likely to lack the sense of ignoring the unnecessary part in listening. For example:

*I wonder ... I mean I was wondering ... if you might possibly ... if you would like to come to dinner.* 'This speech need not contain as much grammatical component as to convey the message for an invitation to a dinner. Such is the case may possibly occur when teaching students with some *authentic material*. So, it will be difficult for a non-native listener to get the meaning. Also, it is not just the redundancy that interferes with the clarity of what someone is saying but people say things that are ungrammatical.. (Harmer, 1983).

A short interview was conducted with two groups of students at BUFT were asked the following questions and they come up with their answers.

*Unnecessary Redundancy*

Group 1		Group 2	
Question	Answer/ Responses	Questions	Answer
What is your future plan?	Masum: I wonder/ I think/ maybe I will be a doctor	Do you think it will rain today?	Razina; Mmm, may be, no let me think, I think it will
What are you planning to do in the evening	Mithila: I think, probably I would hang out with friends	How much money do you want to earn when you join your first job?	Rashed: Probably/ may be 50000 per month
What food will you eat for breakfast?	Rongon: I mean, Mmm I might eat rice	Have you ever thought of getting married?	Saima: I wonder, maybe I will
You want to have coffee with me?	Salim Lu Lucy: I wonder, I mean...I Mightm I might Might	Are you going to attend my birthday party?	I think I can't or probably I will come

Sample conversation collected from students at BGMEA University of Fashion & Technology

The above table manifests the invariable repetition occurring from students' lack of proficiency, which can be inferred upon a recorded conversation which may play unnecessary phrases that put certain barrier to students' quick comprehension process as these phrases causes cognitive delays in comprehending and structuring the sequence in words and phrases.

So the challenge for a listener will be to truncate the unnecessary parts and to switch repeatedly, which is really a difficult task for a non-native Listener. The second thing is 'the *noise* which is termed as *outside interference* for which some sound may be drowned...!' (Ur, 1994).

Students often stumble on detecting the *exact sound* of a word or a *letter* when a particular sound is not extant in their native language. Penny Ur recounts his own personal teaching experience like '...it took me some time to realize that my students actually did not perceive certain English sounds with any accuracy because these did not exist as separate phonemes in their own language' (1994). So, the absence of a linguistic component may put them in a trap of missing out some senses in the listening. Also they may have difficulty with the *sequence* and *juxtapositions* of sounds typical of English words and find *consonant-clusters* difficult to cope with and they get the consonants in the wrong order, for example, hearing *parts* for *past* or *crips* for *crisps* or *little* for *litttle* (Ur, 1994).

In fact, a non-native speaker learning English may encounter problems with *sound-combination*, *lexis* and

*collocation* of a particular word in terms of prediction but a native speaker who hears only /sprin/ can guess that the final phoneme will be /t/, making the word 'sprint'. Also, a foreign-language learner finds it difficult to understand the language-gap<sup>3</sup> and they have a compulsion to understand everything, even things that are totally unimportant. Next, the learner may feel discouraged by a *purposeless*<sup>4</sup> comprehension and he has the feeling that he has missed vital words and may tell the teacher *I don't understand a thing* when in fact he has, or could have, understood quite enough for communicative purposes. Along with this, the prediction of *intonation* and *stress* pattern is difficult for a foreign language learner and other predictions may depend on total familiarity with the clichés, collocations, idioms and proverbs commonly used, for instance, a non-native speaker cannot usually be expected to know that *rosy* often collocates with *cheeks* or *jaded* with *appetite*, nor can he automatically supply the end to such cryptic phrases as *People who live in glass houses...or A stitch in time....*(Ur, 1994).

### 3. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDED TESTING SYSTEM

There is reasonably no warranted panacea for all the problems accrued throughout the discussion above. Whenever we begin a discussion on how to improve the listening skill, of course we often tend to question and discuss the testing system because the anomalies of testing has not been highly accentuated in the agenda of factors propagating the skill of the listener. To be precise, 'a test is designed to encourage students and reinforce their learning through competition though this will not be an appropriate way of accomplishing their receptive skills' (Harmer, 2007). On the other hand, a good test helps to locate the precise areas of difficulty encountered by the class or by the individual student and a test can be motivating if not it is intended to trap students (Harmer, 1983).

So testing is a good way of determining the weaknesses of a student. Since *invisibility* and *quality of tape* recorder is questioned, there can be an easy solution to it and if we divide the auditory tests into two parts to form a better listening activity: 1) test of phoneme discrimination and of sensitivity to stress and intonation, and 2) tests of auditory comprehension (Harmer, 1983).

This is necessary for a foreign language learner to focus first on *phoneme discrimination* as they may puzzle them easily; for example, words such as *sock* and *shock* or *thin* and *tin*' (Harmer, 1983). I strongly agree with Heaton here that this kind of test will help them improve understanding listening in a time-bound test. A similar test can be set for the students making exercises on *homophonic* words example, *thread*, in a sentence- *I'll thread it for you*; it can be spoken or recorded and there can be four options given in the answer script like- a. thread b. tread c. threat d. dread. This kind of work will better than anything else in improving his skill in distinguishing similar sounding words (Heaton, 1983). Most remarkably, some speaking activity can be set to teach pronunciation as 'the assimilation of sounds of a sentence and an unstressed syllable, *accent* or some shortened and neutralized sounds like *schwa* and *ellipses* can be very difficult for non-native speakers of English' (Ur, 1994).

Again, when a student gets engaged in listening they encounter unknown *lexis*, and it can be '...like a dropped barrier causing them to stop and think about the meaning of a word and thus making them miss the next part of the speech' (Underwood, 1989). So, the suggestion can be that students should not consciously think about the vocabulary rather than trying to understand the message (Paran, 1996 in Harmer (2007)). Importantly, the teacher has to remember the lesson not being beyond the comprehension level of the students because it may demotivate them (Harmer, 2007). I also agree with Harmer that he has suggested giving students pre-teaching vocabulary before we introduce them to a listening task so that they can understand while listening to a topic. Along with this, 'we better give the understandable materials rather than *authentic* materials which can be strongly demotivating (Harmer, 2007). Also, we can set questions from *topical* comprehensions and which is well motivating as some of the topics may come up identical to them. Next, a memory *cloze test* can be taken, for instance, the students will hear the text once in its entirety and it is read again, but with pauses for the class to try to recall the next word.... (Cross, 1995). David Cross formulates an excellent pair work which he calls dictogloss:

A *dictogloss* can be worked out in class in pairs: this is like a text is read aloud at a normal speed.

The students can note any key words. They compare their words with those of their partners.

Then the text is read a second time and the pairs try to reconstruct the original text...'(1995:249).

This kind of activity may help students develop their prediction and they tend to develop their own techniques to handle a passage. In fact, every researcher on the topic *how to improve the skill of listening comprehension* talked about different task-based methods. Some researchers suggest the instructors giving tasks, for example, 'preteaching vocabulary, some listening support can be embedded in the task design, such as multiple listening options or question preview, others may occur before a task begins with pre-listening activities. Some popular forms of pre-listening activities are pre-teaching vocabulary, providing topical knowledge, and contextual supports—consciousness-raising and planning' (Skehan, 1998 in Chang (2009)). For example, 'pre-teaching vocabulary may not only provide learners with linguistic knowledge but also raise their consciousness regarding what they may hear, and thus, learners may plan how to cope with a task based on the vocabulary learned' (Chang, 2009). Whereas, John Field suggests, 'students get far more benefit from a lot of listening than from a long pre-listening followed by only one or two exposures to the listening text' (Field 1998a, 2000b in Harmer (2007)). However, the pre-teaching vocabulary can be very useful for the students who lack in vocabulary knowledge. On the contrary, the methodologist Penny Ur is very critical about the chances given to students to hear the audio, he points he says 'in real life, discourse is rarely *replayed* and he suggests encouraging students to get as much information as is necessary from a single hearing' (Ur 1996 in Harmer (2007)). But, his expectation will only be true if students really have that much skill in detecting what is being said. This view goes against Harmer's, '...of course in a conversation it is possible to ask someone to say something again...'(1983). So, the teacher should replay the tape so that listeners get more exposure to it. One research found that students' *consent to the purpose* of tests profoundly motivates their performance... (Young, 1990; In'nama, 2006 in Chang (2009)).

Tomalin (1986) believes that 'TV broadcasts, radio programs and news headlines can be used as effective material to facilitate better listening activity' (1986). However, Harmer asserts that intensive listening with audio device can be demotivating for students and *live* listening instead such as *fast forwarding* and *silent* viewing can trigger prediction in students' mind' (Harmer, 2007). Penny Ur has also recommended 'a sequential teaching which blends oral, reading and writing activity at word level and then sentence level' (Ur, 1994). This is indeed very important that the teacher sets activities which involve students in reading, writing and oral activities together; '...which help them perfect pronunciation and spelling and speaking tasks give students practice in listening to each other (Brown, 2006). After all, it seems that what students have to focus is more exposure to listening. Davis and David Chapman, talks from his personal experience of developing listening skill in Russian:

Extensive listening has come to my aid once more. My routine is to first listen to the recording twice through before following it in the transcript, then finally re-listening without text' (Chapman (1983) in Jordan, 1983).

In spite of all the efforts made to help students through intensive listening or reading, a classroom will be the poorer for the lack of an *extensive reading* or listening program and will be unable to promote its pupils' language development...'(Davis, 1995).

Therefore, it can be perceived, Penny Ur's suggestion to elicit information from single hearing maybe demotivating for students (Harmer, 2007).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

A number of barriers to listening comprehension and their solutions have been discussed to come to a substantial viewpoint, and finally it is perceived that the teaching of listening has to be followed by speaking and writing activities as well. To draw an index to remove the barriers and to enhance the skill, a teaching agenda has to be made and it has to include students' *consent to the purpose* of tests (Young, 1990; In'nama, 2006 in Chang (2009)) *background knowledge* for success in listening (Ching-Shyang and Read, 2006) *pre-teaching vocabulary* and

*understandable material* (Harmer, 2007) and finally *live* and *extensive listening* (Chapman (1983) in Jordan, 1983) to facilitate better listening comprehension.

#### Notes:

1. Inconsistency <sup>1</sup>: In this paper, refers to the sense of providing students with materials which goes beyond their do ability and comprehension.
2. Seemingly <sup>2</sup>: Though listening is apparently different from other skills, in terms of the visibility of the text, there is no intrinsic difference as the success in listening and the activities connecting to it cannot be taught totally isolated from other two skills, speaking and reading. So, it seems that it is different as its message is not seen lying on pages.
3. Language-gap <sup>3</sup>: Language-gap is used to denote the absence of particular grammatical components in the learner's first language, but they are there in his target language.
4. Purposeless <sup>4</sup>: Sometimes, teachers and testers chose materials indiscriminately, and therefore some students are likely to be demotivated by that because they are not expected to know the purpose of their listening to specific material. So the purpose has to be made clear before the listening activity

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