‘LISTENING’ IN INDIAN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM:
A CONCERN

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ABSTRACT

Although English Language Teaching in India is moving away from the traditional grammar-translation approach towards a Communicative Competence model, we still neglect one of the four significant skills of language learning which is recommended in the communicative approach. To be clear and precise, ‘listening’ remains a neglected skill in Indian language curricula. This paper focuses on the need to incorporate listening skill in language curricula in order to improve effective communicative competence. The paper discusses the importance of listening as a language skill. It highlights the obstacles for incorporating listening skills in the language curricula in Indian language classrooms. Eventually, the paper suggests several activities for improving listening skill and recommends some practical and effective listening tasks and materials that are appropriate for the Indian language learning context.

KEYWORDS: communicative approach, communicative competence, listening.

1. INTRODUCTION

After too many days of “learning”. I stopped long enough to simply LISTEN, It was then that I found that LEARNING is that soft quiet thump beneath the fall of the leaf.

In our daily life we often come across statements like “you don’t understand what I say” or “you are not getting my point” etc. The reason behind them may be manifold but the most important reason is the lack of listening effectively. However, most of us do not realize the importance of listening as a communicative tool. Listening has been variously called the most the neglected and forgotten skill in Communication. Hedge (2001) cites statistics from research on the actual use of different skills in everyday life. She reports that “of the time an individual is engaged in communication, approximately 9 percent is devoted to writing, 16 per cent to reading, 30 per cent to speaking and 45 per cent to listening”. Just think of it! We spend nearly half of our communication time in listening, but few of us make any real effort to be better listeners. For those who do, however, the effort gives better results: faster learning, higher productivity, smooth interpersonal relationship and ultimately a harmonious atmosphere. Listening is an important aid to communication. Now one important question arises; what does a communication process involve? Communication, as we all know is a two way process. It involves at least two parties – the sender and the receiver. It involves a sender passing on an idea.
to a receiver. The exchange of ideas becomes effective and fruitful when the receiver comprehends the information or idea that the sender intends to convey. The purpose of any communication is not achieved till the receiver receives the message which the sender wants to put across. In order to communicate effectively we have to be able to hear what the other person is saying. A successful communication takes place only when the receiver participates and listens actively and decodes and interprets what the sender intends to communicate. The International Listening Association (www.listen.org) defines listening as “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages”. While listening actively the receiver may respond verbally as well as non-verbally. For example, verbally s/he may respond, “yes”, “I am listening” or non-verbally s/he can make an eye contact, a head nod, a smile or frown and so on. “It is the recipient who communicates. The so called communicator, the person who emits the communication, does not communicate. He utters. Unless there is someone who hears, there is no communication. There is only noise” (Peter Drucker 1984).

2. LISTENING VERSUS HEARING

All of us can hear, but all of us cannot listen. Hearing and listening are not the same thing. Simply having good hearing does not make one a good listener. In fact, many people who have perfectly good hearing are not good listeners. Hearing is involuntary and listening involves the reception and interpretation of what is heard. Listening starts with hearing but goes beyond this; when we hear something, it is just sound waves reaching our ears and then being forwarded to our brain. If we are actively listening, then we absorb what we hear, we think about it and we store it in our short memory, may be later on, add it to our long term memory. To listen is thus an active effort and hearing is passive. Brownell (2006) defines “Hearing is essentially a physiological process, involves three interconnected stages: reception of sound waves, perception of sound in the brain, and auditory association”. Having good hearing does facilitate one’s perception of sound; but good listeners don’t simply hear words—they focus on the meaning. We communicate effectively with each other insofar as we share meaning. If I tell you something and you misunderstand me, effective communication does not occur. If I tell you something and you understand what I meant—that is, if we have an effective transfer or sharing of meaning—we say that the communication is effective. Effective listening implies that the listener understands what the speaker means. The difference between hearing and listening can be stated this way: Hearing is the reception of sound, listening is the attachment of meaning to the sound. Hearing is passive, listening is active. Understanding the difference between hearing and listening is an important prerequisite for listening effectively.

3. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The importance of listening has been long recognized in the history of English language teaching. Marc Hegelson (2003) writes that the emphasis on listening began in the late 1800s with the Direct Method in Gouin’s Series and the Berlitz School. This was continued by the Audiolingual Method where language was presented orally before being presented in the written form. With the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching, listening was given further prominence because it was believed that learners learn through the act of communication. Tricia Hedge (2001) feels that there is an overall emphasis on listening since “contemporary society
exhibits a shift away from printed media and towards sound, and its members therefore need to develop a high level of proficiency in listening”. She has noticed in education “a stronger focus on listening in the classroom”. She thinks this is due to findings from second language acquisition research, particularly the impact of input on learning. According to Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, “for language learning to occur, it is necessary for learners to understand input language which contains linguistic items that are slightly beyond the learner’s present linguistic competence” (Richards et al, 1985 qt in Helgeson). So the development of listening skill becomes important not only for communication but also for learning language through comprehensible input.

4. BARRIERS TO LISTENING SKILLS IN INDIAN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Effective listening is one of the most important factors in classroom communication. Keeping in view the importance of listening as an indispensable language skill, this paper attempts to highlight its status in Indian language classrooms. In this section, I intend to address some barriers in incorporating listening skills in the language curricula in India. To learn a language is to learn all the four skills of a language which has been identified as reading, writing, speaking, listening. In Indian language learning set up when reading and writing and to some extent, speaking are given much importance, listening is grossly neglected. The major issues affecting and not creating a desirable situation for improving and implementing listening skills in language learning are:

1. lack of awareness regarding listening as a skill,
2. large classrooms,
3. meager classroom infrastructure,
4. Theory versus practice

I will discuss the above issues in the context of Indian language learning and also suggest some solutions to them.

4.1 LACK OF AWARENESS REGARDING LISTENING AS A SKILL

In India, while it is accepted that language can be learnt with an integrated development of four skills, reading, writing, speaking, listening, learners and teachers still do not consider listening at par with other skills. The main reason behind this perhaps can be pointed at lack of awareness in various levels: in the level of curriculum, teacher, classroom infrastructure, and ultimately the learners. In the curriculum listening finds little importance. Even there is no separate examinations for listening. Teachers lack professional training in improving listening skills of students. They are at a loss when the need of teaching listening arises. Role of classroom infrastructure in improving listening skills will be discussed in detail in the following section. The learners are dependent on classroom teaching and concentrate on the blackboard or whiteboard for gaining knowledge. Moreover, they are busy with writing assignments, project works, mid semester, end semester examination. So they hardly find time for listening.
4.2 LARGE CLASSROOMS

In Indian context, large classrooms are another barrier in the way of listening skills. While doing listening activities, teachers face a real challenge in large classrooms, such as, diversity of students, lack of flexibility, class climate management, difficulty of setting and enforcing classroom behaviour (crowd control), limited monitoring of students' learning and difficulty in engaging students to activities. There is a dramatic increase in the class size in the lecture classes; the classroom strength ranges from 80 to 90 in each class. Sometimes it goes up to 150. In such contexts, listening being a dynamic and practical language skill faces major problem and becomes ineffective.

4.3 MEAGER CLASSROOM INFRASTRUCTURE

Most Indian classrooms are inadequate from infrastructure point of view although a lot of implementations have been made by the Government. The classrooms do not accommodate up-to-date requirements like projectors, white boards, over head projectors (O.H.P), LCDs for an effective and successful learning environment which is a prerequisite for listening skill. Implementation of a well-equipped language laboratory is far from question.

4.4 THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE

A major setback in improving listening skills in India lies in its curriculum. Indian language curriculum to a large extent in theory based. This theoretical emphasis encourages cramming of book and not being innovative and analytical. From nursery onwards, we are advised to keep our eyes wide open so as to scan every sentence printed in our academic book thereby creating a photocopy of it in the examinations. Moreover, it is sometimes ridiculous to imagine how a three-hour-duration written examination scrutinizes the talent, efforts and dedication of a student? So theory based teaching blocks all the ways for practice of listening skills.

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS

After an elaborate discussion on the importance of listening as a requisite skill in Indian language context, the paper highlights the barriers that arise in the way of listening. To overcome these barriers the paper intends to suggest some remedies which can provide an effective teaching listening atmosphere in Indian language classrooms. The suggestions are discussed below:

5.1 PROFESSIONAL TRAINING FOR TEACHERS

For listening to be recognized as an important and effective skill in language learning context, it has to be initiated in the level of teachers. Teachers should be given adequate training in the teaching of listening; there should be listening activity based trainings and workshops for teacher. Once the teachers are aware of the role of listening in language learning, half of the problem is solved so far as listening in Indian language classroom is concerned.
5.2 RENOVATION OF CLASSROOM INFRASTRUCTURE

Indian language classrooms are overcrowded and ill equipped. The classrooms create little room for listening to be accepted as a language skill. Apart from a blackboard or a whiteboard, couple of chalks, the classrooms do not have technical equipments that are required for listening. Classrooms should have speech training facilities so that learners can practice and identify complex utterances.

5.3 TEAM BASED LEARNING

To create an effective listening session in the classroom context, the class can be divided into different groups or teams. The interaction between teachers and students is more dynamic and effective in small groups. Students get personal attention as well as teachers receive feedback from the students’ side. There are more chances of clarifications and comprehension in small teams since students interact with teachers and peer group.

5.4 IMPLEMENTING LANGUAGE LABORATORY

For improving listening skills, implementation of language laboratory is a must. Students receive adequate ear training and practice in language laboratory. They get acquainted with the sound pattern, stress, pitch and intonation of English as a second language.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper believes that by following the above suggestions teachers can create an effective classroom atmosphere for teaching listening. Moreover, teachers should keep in mind that a listening class should not focus on just playing lots of recordings and testing grammar, vocabulary or writing skill. John Field (1998) asserts that most listening activities provide practice but does not teach the skill. He contends, “Under the present ‘comprehension’ approach, success in listening is measured by correct responses to questions in tasks. Teachers focus upon the outcome of listening rather than upon listening itself, upon product rather than process” (1998). Listening can also be associated with speaking and writing for improving comprehending and understanding ability of students. Anderson and Lynch (1988) recommend that teachers can exploit listening exercises to assist understanding spoken language instead of assessing the amount students actually understand. Last but not the least, the paper aims to suggest that our aims in teaching listening should be to expose our learners to a range of listening experiences, make listening purposeful, help students to approach the listening task in an appropriate manner and finally build up their confidence in their own listening ability.

REFERENCES


The International Listening Association (www.listen.org)