

## What problems do your learners have with listening?

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### **Abstract**

The fundamental problem I propose to consider in this paper is this: how can I combine my understanding of students' problems with listening comprehension and suggest techniques for helping them develop more effective listening skills without destroying that degree of initiative which is necessary for autonomous communicative learning. I shall begin with an overview of my students' problems. I shall examine my readings and their authors' findings, and having stated the problems, I shall examine what can be done towards their solution.

*"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears"*

William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616)

Listening comprehension in a second language is no easy task. Listening usually lags far behind speaking and is probably the most neglected of the four language skills in the classroom. While my students can control to a certain degree what they say, they cannot control what others will say to them, so some degree of panic usually sets in. Although many students may do well and feel very successful in their high-school or university English courses, they have a hard time to understand the spoken language when it is used 'in the street.' In his book, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Harmer, J (2001, p. 228 y 229) describes

two types of listening, 'external' and 'internal.' The external listening is that which students come across in situations outside the classroom, such as, listening to the radio or TV, songs, public address systems, and of course, native speakers, etc. To understand my students' problems with listening, I gave them a questionnaire to fill in. The results showed an amazing 62% had 'external' listening problems. People in general, and native speakers in particular, just "speak too fast" for them to follow. Surprisingly, a low 12% said that they had problems related to internal listening, e.g, in their classrooms with their teachers, or more specifically, when their teachers were giving them instructions. However, I personally find that there are always students that fail to follow instructions well no matter how slowly or clearly the task is explained.

Even though speaking is a more complex skill than listening, developing listening skills may take years of painful and frustrating learning depending on the age, motivation, and aptitude they have in Mexico. A major problem my students have, in contrast to students studying English in the United States, is that they have little or no experience in 'real' listening to fall back on, no memory of past learning or social experiences. The fact that they live in a non-English speaking country is a major contributing factor to their listening problems. As Anderson and Lynch pointed out (1988) 'that lack of social, factual, and, contextual knowledge of the target language can present an obstacle to comprehension because language is used to express its culture'. In listening, my students have always lacked commitment and to a large degree are almost totally passive. As few native speakers, if any, speak *to* them and expect an answer that will create commitment.

Their listening consists of TV and radio programs or classroom material where they need not reply, other than a 'yes' or 'no', or worse still, a nod or shake of the head. Much of their listening in the classroom is largely superficial and artificial consisting of recorded material that has been specially prepared for them at their level by actors whose language is not that of 'the street', therefore, lacking spontaneity. Responding to spontaneous listening situations has been minimal, and this, coupled with natural shyness, has created a certain passivity and fear of listening, producing a feeling of panic that they will not understand what is being said to them.

What are the problems students have with listening? Another point of view has been expanded by Willis (1981, p.134) who lists a series of skills for listening dealing with problems, which she calls 'enabling skills'. To quote a few are:

- Predict what people are going to talk about
- Guessing at unknown words or phrases without panicking
- Using one's own knowledge of the subject to help one understand
- Understanding inferred information, e.g., speakers' attitudes or intentions

If students lack the above skills, listening will always be a problem. For my students, and students in general, not dealing with or having native speakers as friends in their daily lives makes the problem of listening more acute. Finocchiaro (1973, p. 107) points out 'The speaker whose speech style we are familiar with and the situation about which we are hearing or in which we are participating at the time as well as the lexical combinations which we have grown to expect, all make it possible for us to hear only fifty percent of what is being said and yet to "decode" or

understand the “message”.’ With this in mind, e.g., if native speakers only hear fifty percent of what is said to them, students who have limited access to everyday situations in English will experience enormous difficulties? Listening problems revolve around the lack of the ability to identify and understand what others are saying.

My personal classroom experiences and those of many writers that I have read on the subject seem to suggest that difficulty in listening comes from four sources: i) the message to be listened to, ii) the speaker, iii) the listener, and iv) the physical setting. Most students find it difficult to listen to a message than to read the same message written in their text book, or elsewhere. Since they can not control the speed of listening, it becomes a problem, whereas, they can take their time with reading, stopping and going back over the message at will. They can even consult a dictionary if they so choose.

Giving dictations or having the students dictate to each other, I find there are some specific areas of vocabulary that give special problems. My students have problem hearing the past tense of regular verbs ending in voiceless sounds such as, ‘work, wish, or watch’. The final /t/ sound of ‘ed’ sound is usually omitted when taking dictation so that the sentence, “*I worked hard yesterday.*” Comes out as “*I work hard yesterday.*” The students fail to hear the final voiceless ‘t’. Another problem is liaison (the linking of words in rapid speech). “*What are you going to do tonight?*” sounds like, /*Whadiyagunnadotanight?*/ For the untrained ear liaison presents an awesome problem.

Up to this point, I have dealt with problems students have with listening. It is now time to turn to suggesting techniques for helping them develop more effective

listening skills. Foreign-language students usually devote more time to reading than to listening, and so lack exposure to different kinds of listening. It is tiring for students to spend much of their listening time on interpreting unfamiliar words and sentences for long periods of time. What can I do to help? Not all their problems can be overcome, but this does not mean that I can not do something about them.

I can begin by providing them with suitable listening situations and materials, capitalizing on being a native speaking: by speaking to them only in English, by helping them with cultural English speaking backgrounds (culture capsules), by creating pleasant and supportive classroom conditions, useful exercises that will help gain confidence, therefore, discover the pleasure of listening to English by themselves. Always bearing in mind that the final aim is for them to understand native speakers in real life.

I can include task-oriented exercises to engage the students' interest and help them learn listening skills. As Ur (1984, p. 25) has said, "Listening exercises are more effective if they are constructed round a task. That is to say, the students are required to do something in response to what they hear that will demonstrate their understanding." She has also suggested some tasks: expressing agreement or disagreement, taking notes, marking a picture or diagram according to instructions, and answering questions. Compared with past teaching techniques, communicative task-based exercises have an obvious advantage: they not only test the students' listening comprehension, but also encourage them to use different kinds of listening skills to reach their objectives in a natural active way.

I can give daily practice in liaisons in order to help them get used to forms of rapid natural speech. Ur (1984, p. 46) has suggested introducing colloquial collocations to imitate native speakers' pronunciation. She has listed a few:

Let's have                /lets v/

There isn't any        /ðrizndeni/

Another important aspect is making students aware of different native speaker accents. American accent is quite different from British, Canadian and Australian, for example. Another area that I can develop by presenting material is the non-native speaker using English: the Japanese, or Mexican themselves, for example. Therefore, it is necessary to have students deal with these different accents, especially in external listening.

In conclusion, I must find out all I can about how listening comprehension can be improved and what activities are useful to this end and then use this knowledge and these activities in my classroom. 'The purpose of these or any other tasks is to give students more and more reasons to listen. If they can then share their information with colleagues they will feel they have contributed to the progress of [not only themselves] but the whole group. "The motivational power of such feelings should not be underestimated" (Harmer, 2001. p. 228).

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