

Diagnosing the Development of the Listening Skill in Early Education in Public Schools

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Resumen

El aporte lingüístico que el docente provee dentro del aula de inglés en Costa Rica es esencial para lograr competencia en la habilidad de escucha ya que, al darse dentro un contexto extranjero, la exposición de los estudiantes a ésta es limitada. El Ministerio de Educación Pública requiere que los estudiantes sean expuestos a aportes lingüísticos tales como conversaciones, descripciones, instrucciones, canciones, actividades deportivas, videos, y cualquier otra forma de material oral y autentico para que escuchen (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2012, p. 21). La habilidad de escucha debe recibir prioridad durante la educación primaria, sin embargo, poca investigación se ha realizado en esta área. El siguiente estudio exploratorio pretende describir la situación que caracteriza el desarrollo de la habilidad de escucha con estudiantes de segundo ciclo en escuelas públicas. La investigación responde las siguientes preguntas: cuáles barreras limitan el desarrollo de la habilidad de escucha, cuál es el conocimiento de los docentes acerca de estrategias de aprendizaje y que recursos son necesarios para mejorar la enseñanza de esta habilidad en la escuela primaria. Para obtener la información, veinte docentes de inglés de diferentes tipos de escuelas (grandes, pequeñas, rurales o urbanas) participaron en la encuesta. El estudio reveló que los maestros no cuentan con el material audiovisual y equipo tecnológico apropiado para desarrollar ejercicios de escucha con los estudiantes de segundo ciclo, algunas características de los escolares interfieren en el desarrollo de esta habilidad, y existe una percepción errónea de lo que el término estrategias de comprensión auditiva implica.

Palabras clave: habilidad de escucha, estrategias de comprensión auditiva, material autentico y no-autentico, barreras al escuchar

Abstract

The input that a teacher provides in the English classroom in Costa Rica is essential to accomplish competence in the listening skill since the language is taught as a foreign language and thus, student's exposure to it is limited. The Ministry of Public Education requires teachers to "expose their students to a considerable amount of meaningful language input by listening to conversations, descriptions, directions, songs, sports activities, videos and any other form of authentic spoken material" (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2012, p. 21). The listening skill should be a priority during the elementary school years; however, little

research has been carried out in this field. The following exploratory study aims at describing the situation embracing the development of the listening skill of second cycle students in public schools. The questions addressed through the research include: what barriers block the development of the listening skill; what is the teachers' knowledge about learning strategies, and what resources do teachers need to improve the teaching of this skill in primary school. In order to obtain the information, twenty English teachers from different types of schools (big, small, rural, urban) participated in the survey conducted. The study revealed that teachers lack appropriate audiovisual material and media devices to develop listening exercises with second cycle students; some learner characteristics interfere in the development of this skill; and there is a mistaken perception of what the concept of listening comprehension strategies entails.

Keywords: listening skill, listening comprehension strategies, authentic and non-authentic material, listening barriers

1. Introduction

In Costa Rica, most of the contact young learners have with the English language occurs mainly within the school environment. According to the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) guidelines, language teaching should take place by following a communicative approach. That is, English teachers are responsible for developing a language-teaching program, where communication is the ultimate goal, and where oral and aural skills should receive particular attention. Actually, during the first three years of formal instruction (known as the First Cycle) students work only on listening and speaking activities. Reading and writing tasks are introduced and developed during the next three years (fourth, fifth and sixth grades), which encompass the second cycle. However, the English syllabus states that listening and speaking should continue to be the main emphasis of the curriculum. Thus, the enhancement of the listening skill in the English classroom is seen as a priority during the elementary school years.

The following research aims at analyzing the listening instruction process of second cycle students by first identifying the barriers that teachers face during this process and then by analyzing the learning strategies that they promote during their listening lessons to aid their students achieve comprehension. Up to now, there is little research in this field within the Costa Rican context. Most investigations have focused specifically on university and high school instruction; and there is no record available on how the listening skill is being developed within the elementary school context. Neither have studies about the use of listening comprehension strategies been done in order to provide insights for the development of this skill in the EFL classroom. Thus, the present study intends to mark a starting point in the specific area of teaching English as a foreign language to primary school students within the public Costa Rican context. Attending to the reality and difficulties faced in the process of teaching listening gives way to understand better this educational phenomenon.

For the present study, twenty English teachers were surveyed about the difficulties they usually find when teaching listening to second cycle students in primary school and their knowledge about the learning strategies they could implement to help their students achieve comprehension. The teachers chosen work in different public schools in the region of Pérez Zeledón. Their teaching experience ranges from seven to eighteen years of working with kids. Furthermore, their schools vary in features such as the size, number of students, and socio-economical context where they are located. Thus, getting insights from teachers who work at different settings (big, small, urban, or rural institutions) gives the possibility of diagnosing the teaching phenomena in a better way. So, the investigation was addressed to answer the following research questions: Which barriers do teachers face in the classroom when working on the listening skill with second cycle students? What is the teachers' knowledge about listening comprehension strategies? What do teachers need to improve the teaching of this skill in primary school? By answering these questions, it was possible to analyze general implications of the listening instruction process of second cycle students in the region of Perez Zeledón.

2. Literature Review

The process of listening requires a person to pay attention to a speaker, decode a given message, interpret its meaning, and in most cases, give a response to what has been heard. In the case of foreign or second language learning this task can become more complicated due to the differences between the L1 (native language) and L2 (second language) since the target language rules regarding grammar, intonation, and pronunciation, among other aspects, may significantly differ from the speaker's native one. Xiao-yun and Gui-rong (2011) supported this premise by stating that "listeners should make complex processing to the language signals that they hear, and make it consistent with the speaker's real intention and store it in short-term memory" (p.316) to finally achieve comprehension. Furthermore, since in a foreign language context, students do not usually have many opportunities to receive input in the target language besides the one they get at school, the practice provided during class time is key for the development of the listening skill. Mendoza (2005) concluded that since "classroom listening is not real-life listening" (p. 1), the activities proposed should allow learners to get in contact with at least some of the features of real-life-situations.

2.1. Factors that Affect Listening Comprehension

During the last decades, researchers on first and second language learning have studied a series of factors that influence listening comprehension. Rubin (1996) related learners' difficulties to understand a message to variations in aspects such as the listening passage, the purpose for listening, the personal features of the speaker and the listener, the nature of the interaction between the participants or cognitive activity to be done. She summarized these five factors as text, task, interlocutor, speaker, and process characteristics (p. 199). On the other hand, Underwood stated that comprehension problems might be related to different cultural and educational backgrounds. He explained that situations like problems of interpretation, limited vocabulary, lack of control over the speed of the speakers, failure to

recognize the "signals" of conversation, difficulty to concentrate, and lack of appropriate learning habits can affect the learner when confronted to tasks based on recorded conversations or texts (as cited in Chen, 2005, p. 2). Any of these aspects that Underwood enlisted or a combination of them is going to result in problems to comprehend the message transmitted.

In the same way, Xiao-yun and Gui-rong (2011) claimed that second language learners deal with a series of listening barriers. They enlisted psychological obstacles, phonetic obstacles, misunderstanding of intonation, wrong pronunciation, unknowing about the phonetic phenomena, vocabulary and grammar obstacles, and non-linguistic handicaps as the main sources of interference that prevent learners from achieving listening comprehension (pp. 316-318). Although displayed under different categories, the sources of interference that students encounter are numerous and directly affect the listening process, evidencing that achieving listening comprehension is not an easy task. Teachers are then challenged to help students deal with and overcome those difficulties. Many decide to expose the learners to a wide range of listening input during the first years of formal language instruction so that they can become familiar with different accents, types of intonation, genres, and types of text organization.

2.2. Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are thoughts and actions, consciously selected by learners, to assist them in the completion of specific language tasks and in learning and using the language in general. Oxford (2003) stated that "language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how -and how well -our students learn a second or foreign language" (p. 1), as she remarked the importance of training learners in this field. Therefore, exposing students to plenty of input is not enough to ensure comprehension. Students need to be trained on what to do and how to handle all that input so that they can be involved in an effective learning experience.

Former studies in this field reveal the existence of different types and classifications. For instance, Cohen (1996) established two main categories, "language learning strategies" and "language use strategies" where the former help learners improve their knowledge of the L2 and the latter aid students when using the language that is part of their current interlanguage. Students may choose to use either type or make a combination of both in the process of learning and using the target language (pp. 2-3). Thanks to the application of these strategies, daily life events, which not necessarily have teaching purposes, can be turned into significant learning experiences. However, learners need previous instruction on this area in order to make wise decisions on which strategies to use.

There are specific learning strategies that can be used to address the different language skills as well as the multiple language purposes that a student can have in his learning process. In 1990, Oxford proposed an inventory of strategies for language learning, which has actually served as the basis for other researchers to carry out further studies due to its high validity, reliability and utility. Her proposal on strategy types can be summarized as follows:

- Memory strategies have a highly specific function of helping students store and retrieve new information.
- Cognitive strategies enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means.
- Metacognitive strategies allow students to control and coordinate the learning process.
- Compensation strategies favor the use of the language despite the learners' gaps in knowledge that are so common in the interlanguage.
- Affective strategies help students regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes.
- Social strategies promote students' learning by interacting with others. (Oxford, 1990, pp. 37-135)

The final goal of all these strategies is to aid the second or foreign language students in overcoming the obstacles that they will possibly find in their attempt to learn the language when confronted to the different macro and micro skills. Teachers who are aware of these strategies and their corresponding classification can direct their teaching practice better towards helping students become skilled users of the new language.

3. Research Findings

Listening is a core activity in any language learning environment. The Ministry of Public Education in Costa Rica seems to acknowledge this given the directions that it has stated in the English syllabus. The MEP requires teachers to “expose their students to a considerable amount of meaningful language input by listening to conversations, descriptions, directions, songs, sports activities, videos and any other form of authentic spoken material” (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2012, p. 21). In addition, as explained before, listening and speaking should receive the main emphasis during the six years of primary school instruction. Through the survey conducted, it was possible to get important insights about the teaching of this skill when working with second cycle students in primary schools. The teachers who answered the questions belong to different settings, have a different a range of teaching experience, and their schools are located in different socio-economic contexts. However, their responses showed many similarities regarding the three main factors analyzed through the survey: the barriers they face when teaching listening, their knowledge about listening comprehension strategies and the resources they need to favor the development of the skill.

3.1. Which Barriers Are Faced in the EFL Classroom when Developing the Listening Skill?

According to the information provided by the teachers, the lack of suitable materials to teach listening to their students constitutes their main obstacle. A hundred percent of the informants expressed that besides the English syllabus, the MEP does not provide a particular

book, manual, or any other source to aid teachers when planning listening activities. This means that English teachers encounter the challenge of finding resources to implement in their classes and provide students with the input needed to develop communicative competence in this area. Some teachers explained that this search for appropriate materials is time consuming, and they do not have enough time to do this since they deal with a lot of paperwork at their schools and they should plan activities and look for resources to teach the other skills too.

The challenge of developing listening activities to teach the contents included in the English syllabus becomes even bigger when encountered with the need of finding materials that meet both the students' linguistic level and their interests. When asked what their main problems were, teachers explained that, often, authentic audiovisual resources present language that is too advanced for their students. Also, native speakers usually in the videos or tracks talk too fast and it is hard for the children to get the gist of what is going on. On the other hand, authentic sources in which the language used is simpler and easier to understand do not catch the attention of second cycle students since those audiovisual materials are usually addressed to very young native speakers, pre-K for instance. Informants added that, due to their age, students do not like to get involved in games, songs, and role-plays as they used to during the first cycle. Figure 1 shows how the majority of the informants expressed that it is difficult for them, when planning listening activities, to find suitable resources that meet the characteristics just mentioned. Only very few teachers expressed that they do not have difficulties in this area since they have collected a series of materials through their years of teaching experience.

Other barriers that teachers identified relate to the environment in which teaching takes place and to characteristics of the learners. In first place, the main external factors mentioned include the absence of adequate technological devices, noise and distractions outside the classroom, and noise caused by the students themselves. Some teachers stated that their schools lack a TV, computer, or speakers that they can use to play movies or other type of audiovisual material. Other informants explained that the equipment they have does not meet the requirements for students to carry out the tasks properly. Others expressed the need of having a language lab where interruptions and outer noise could be avoided. Finally, some said that their groups are numerous and noisy so practicing listening becomes really difficult. On the other hand, regarding students' characteristics, teachers said that there is a "negative attitude" toward the listening activities since some learners reject the aural input that appears in videos or other recorded sources preferring their teacher's voice instead. Finally, some teachers believe that there is a general lack of interest in learning English from students' part. Figure 2 shows the barriers that the informants considered to be the most important in their teaching situation.

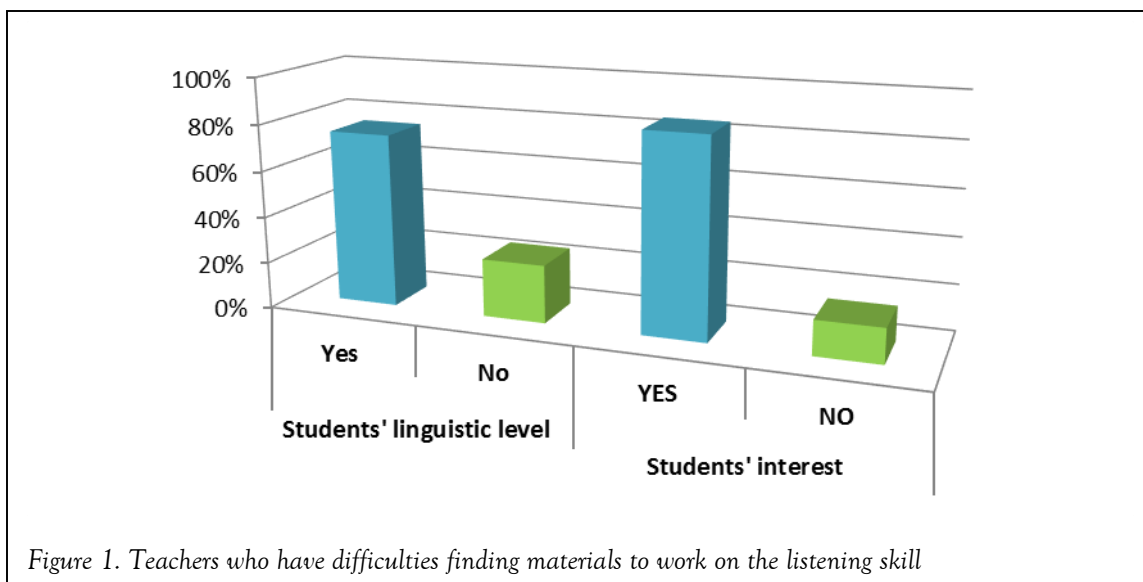


Figure 1. Teachers who have difficulties finding materials to work on the listening skill

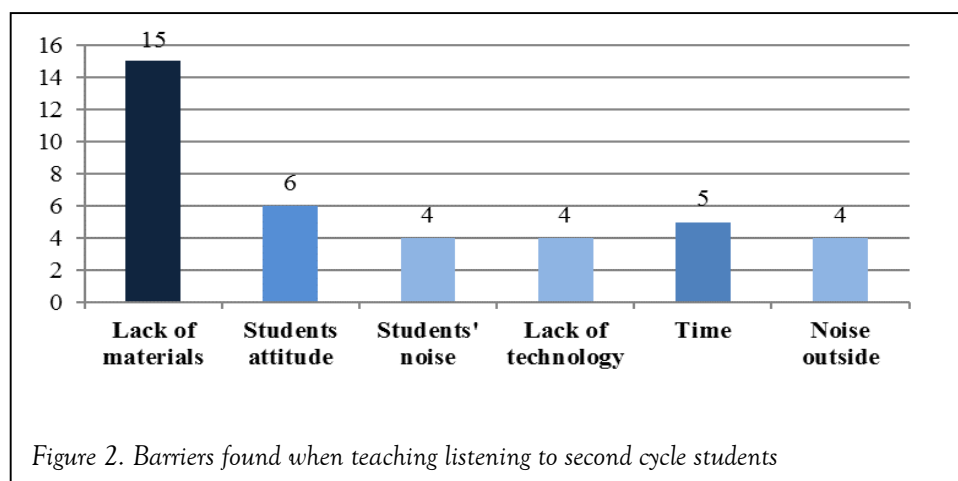


Figure 2. Barriers found when teaching listening to second cycle students

3.2. What is the teachers' knowledge about listening comprehension strategies?

The process of learning how to listen in a foreign language, has been described as “an encoding and decoding process in which the listeners make use of a set of techniques to reach comprehension” (Bozorgian and Pillay, 2013, p. 106). These researchers used the term “technique” to refer to those means learners use to approach the aural material so that they can achieve comprehension in a more effective way. The reason why the application of listening strategies is important lays in the fact that, using them at the beginning stages of learning can lead to skillful and more independent listeners since through time and constant practice, strategies will evolve and students will use them more automatically. The present survey also got insights about the acquaintance of teachers with these ways to assist students in the completion of listening language tasks, and their application in the English class. Figure 3 shows how the majority of the teachers claimed to put into practice listening comprehension strategies in their classes.

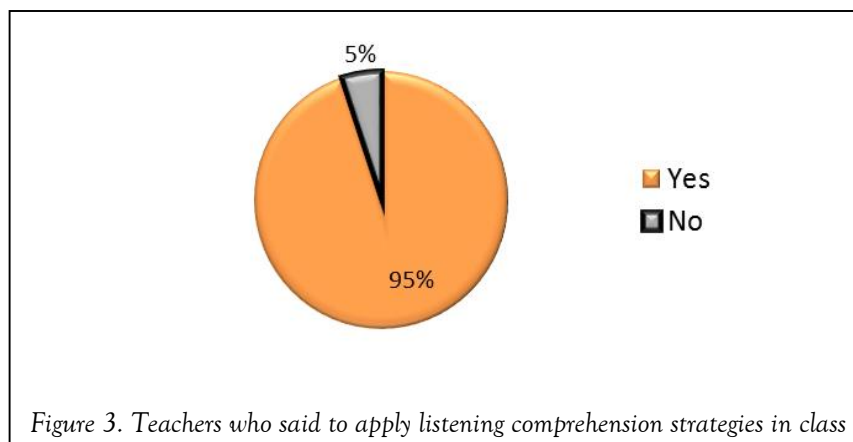


Table 1
Teachers' view of listening comprehension strategies

Correct responses	Mistaken views of strategies	
	As activities	As assessment
“Ways to help learners’ improve their listening comprehension skill and to assess their progress.”	“Activities through which students may show their listening skills.”	“Set of actions to measure listening abilities”
“Techniques that contribute directly to comprehension and recall of listening input.”	“All the listening activities done to develop student's ability to listen.”	“The different ways a teacher may use to teach and evaluate this skill.”
“Methods you implement in the classroom for the students to improve the level of understanding.”	“These are the activities or materials suitable to assimilate better a target content and achieve adequate interest”	“Students listen to something and solve some exercises based on it while the teacher grades them.”

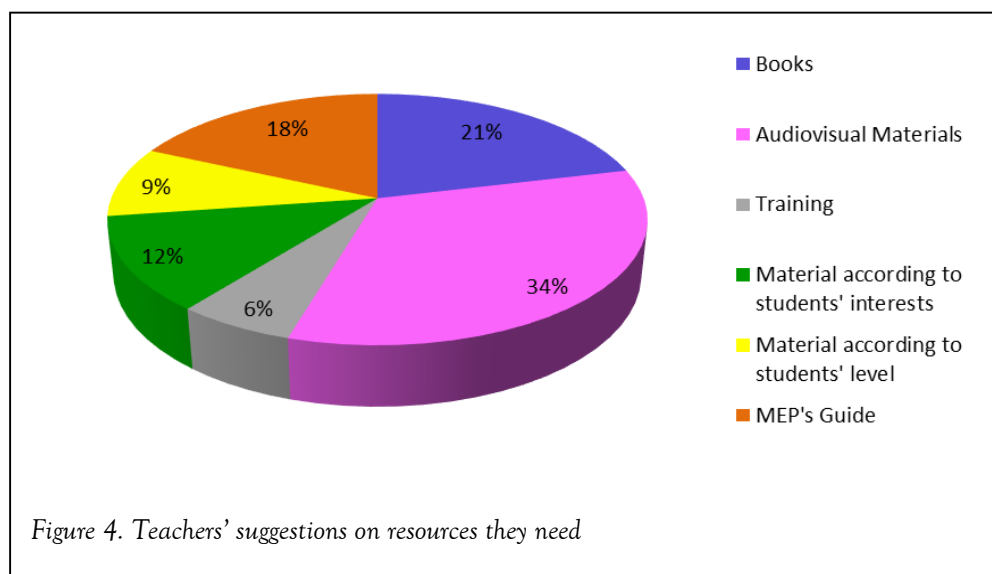
Note. Sample definitions provided by the surveyed teachers when asked, What do you understand by listening comprehension strategies.

Through the questionnaire, nonetheless, it was possible to see that most teachers have a mistaken perception of what the application of listening comprehension strategies really entails. When asked to provide a definition of the term, most of the informants described examples of either activities or materials used to work on the listening skill. There was also a tendency to relate the term to ways to evaluate or measure students’ aural ability. Just four out of the 20 teachers viewed listening strategies as tools addressed to aid comprehension. Table 1 shows some of the definitions those teachers provided. Due to these faulty views, there is a possibility that most students in the schools of the participants might be receiving listening input without getting any additional aid on how to take control of their own learning, act on the input received, and thus become better language learners. Teachers mentioned that, in the past two years, they have not received any training on how to teach the listening skill or how to put into practice listening comprehension strategies in class.



3.3. What do teachers need to teach listening in a better way?

Informants acknowledged that teaching listening to second cycle students is a difficult task. As children grow older, their interests change, and they do not like to get involved in role-plays and songs as much as they used to during the first cycle. In addition, the level of difficulty of the contents in the syllabus increases. Teachers explained that some topics are not attractive at all even to them. Also, they have to spend time introducing and teaching reading and writing skills, which means that they cannot take as much time to work on listening as they did in first, second, and third grades. The survey, requested the participants to enlist a series of resources that are missing and that they considered would significantly help them when teaching listening to these young learners. Figure 4 shows how teachers' responses mainly addressed the need of books and audiovisual materials to implement listening activities in their classroom. Similarly, teachers agreed that the MEP should provide a general guide with listening sources. In this way, students in different contexts would receive a similar amount of exposure to listening input, because up to now they are working with what their tutors are able to find since teachers are on their own when looking for materials.



4. Conclusions

The development of the listening skill in a foreign language class can be a challenging task. Following are the conclusions that the research brought about in regard to barriers teachers must overcome in this process, their knowledge about the application of listening comprehensions strategies, and their needs related to ways in which they can favor the development of this skill. First, with regard to the barriers found, the lack of suitable audiovisual materials and technological devices are the main issues that prevent teachers from exposing their students to an appropriate amount of aural input. Also external factors such as the noise coming either from the children themselves or from outside the classroom

are interfering with the process of achieving understanding. Finally, students' attitude towards listening activities and their lack of interest in the subject is also interfering in the learning process.

Second, there is a mistaken understanding of what listening comprehension strategies are. Most participants confused this term with specific activities to work on or to assess this skill. If most teachers are not clear about the meaning and use of these strategies, it may be inferred that their students do not have idea of what these techniques are or how useful they can be. Therefore, there is a possibility that those kids are being confronted with aural input in the target language but cannot approach the tasks in a way that they ensure comprehension. Taking into consideration, that English teachers lack suitable resources to develop the listening skill, and that the tasks applied to second cycle students may lack the application of comprehension strategies, it may be inferred that the listening instruction process is not being carried out in a way that helps children become independent listeners. In other words, these learners might be far from reaching the objectives proposed by the Ministry of Public Education. There is an urgent need of providing these teachers with the necessary materials and tools to properly work on the enhancement of the listening skill.

Finally, the research at hand serves as a diagnosis for future studies in the field of the development of the listening skill in primary schools. Further research could include a deeper analysis of the situations stated throughout this paper by carrying out a set of case studies at different schools in the region of Perez Zeledón. In this way, it would be possible to get a better view of the reality that second cycle students live when attempting to develop this aural skill. It is important to mention that the diagnosis carried out in this work represents a small-scale study; so the findings in this paper are limited to the information provided by the 20 participants. Since in the region there are around 110 English teachers working at primary schools, the situation with regard to the type of barriers found and the application of learning strategies might change in those cases that were not included in the survey. Likewise, there might be cases of second cycle students who are developing appropriate listening skills without any exposure to listening comprehension strategies on their teachers' part.

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Appendix 1

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL SEDE REGIONAL BRUNCA

Research topic: Diagnosing the development of the listening skill in early education in public schools

Researchers: Licda. Johanna Chaves Agüero, M.Sc. Beatriz Gamboa Sánchez

Practical Background Diagnostic

This questionnaire aims at gathering information about the situation English teachers face in public schools when working on the listening skill with second cycle students.

Your ideas are of great value and your cooperation is appreciated. The data collected will only be used for this research and it will remain confidential. Feel free to share your ideas when answering the questionnaire, the information provided will be very important for

Instructions: Provide the information throughout the questionnaire as required.

PART A: Personal Information

1. Degree: _____
2. Years of Teaching Experience in elementary schools: _____
3. Grades you currently teach:

First Grade ()	Second Grade ()	Third Grade ()
Fourth Grade ()	Fifth Grade ()	Sixth Grade ()

PART B: Research topic information

1. Do you encounter barriers when developing the listening skill with second cycle students?
Yes () No () Go to question 3.



2. What kind of barriers do you frequently face?

3. When planning listening comprehension activities for second cycle students, do you have difficulty finding suitable material according to their linguistic level?

Yes () Which? _____

No ()

4. When planning listening comprehension activities for second cycle students, do you have difficulty finding material that appeals to students' interest?

Yes () Which? _____

No () Go to question 6.

5. Which are the reasons that cause those difficulties?

6. What do you understand by *Listening Comprehension Strategies*?

7. Do you apply Listening Comprehension Strategies in your classroom?
Yes ()
No ()
8. Have you received any training dealing with the application of listening comprehension strategies in the past two years?
Yes () How many? _____

No ()
9. Have you received any training dealing with the development of the listening skill in general in the past 2 years?

Yes () How many? _____

No ()
10. Is there a particular book or manual provided or suggested by the MEP that aids you when planning activities to work on the listening skill with II Cycle students?
Yes () No ()
11. Do you consider that you need more resources to help you develop the listening skill of your students?
Yes () What kind? _____

No ()