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SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION

With the application of new methodologies such as Total Physical Response and the Natural Approach, the teaching of comprehension becomes worthy of better attention in the language classroom. During the last few years, there has been a noticeable change of attitude by language teachers toward the importance of emphasizing listening and reading comprehension practice in the second/foreign language curriculum. More English teachers support the necessity and significance of including those two skills as main links of the language-teaching process.

Particularly the recognition of listening comprehension as a separate skill is undoubtedly valid, if we take into consideration that learning a language involves the integration and manipulation of many skills, and specifically that listening takes an active and essential role in the communication process. From this point of view, there can not be effective, appropriate production, if there

is not an adequate comprehension of what is heard. In our foreign language situation, the necessity of training the students in understanding oral English increases due to the little opportunity they have of listening and interacting with native speakers in natural, unstructured situations.

Despite the attention that the listening skill has been receiving during the last few years, there is still a lack of enough emphasis; above all, there are some aspects in the teaching of this skill that deserve their rightful attention, so that the listening goals be more appropriately achieved. One of the aspects that needs to be reconsidered has to do with the belief that listening is a passive skill. Consequently, the teaching implications derived from this view have to be reformed in order to prepare the students more adequately to develop and increase their aural proficiency for showing a more acceptable comprehension of the English language. I want to emphasize the fact that listening is not a passive, but an active skill, providing at the same time, some suggestions that you might find useful when dealing with a listening comprehension text.

Listening, as well as reading, has long been considered a skill that the student would acquire somewhere in the process along with other skills. The audiolingualism was a clear example of this belief if we remember that students were asked to listen and repeat rather than listen and understand. Fortunately, research in psycholinguistics and some other areas has supplied some important input that supports the active nature of listening comprehension. Today it is well known that in order to grasp the meaning of something heard, the listener has to deal with a series of very

complex mental processes: (1) identification of surface structures (the speaker's words) to be able to end up with (2) an interpretation that resembles an underlying representation, and (3) utilization of those underlying representations for additional purposes, such as registering new information, answering questions, carrying out orders, registering orders, etc. In other words, the listener also has to discover how s/he is expected to utilize the speaker's utterances.

Similarly, for each of these three steps: identification of words, building interpretations, and utilization of those interpretations, the listener follows other systematic processes, at the same time that s/he uses a combination of phonological, syntactic, and semantic strategies to show inference of meanings. All this leads us to the conclusion that listening, as a very complex operation carried out by complex mental processes, can not be taken for granted; on the contrary, the idea of passiveness associated with it is totally misleading, for it is clear that such a skill requires an active involvement from the listener.

All this psycholinguistic evidence of the active nature of listening comprehension demands that language teachers review some common contradictory strategies still used in the teaching of listening. It is no longer valid, for instance, to have students listen to a conversation or passage merely to repeat what they hear, sometimes even without understanding, or to answer simple questions that only show retention of particular elements rather than real comprehension of the message, which is actually the main goal when listening to someone. The language learner should always be encouraged to take part in a more

active process of listening for meaning so that, when trying to understand a message, s/he will be able to activate all the linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge that s/he possesses.

The following techniques have proven to be especially effective for making listening practice a more meaningful and active task:

A. Providing a pre-listening phase.

Students must not be exposed to the listening text immediately, without any previous introduction to it. Non-native listeners should be provided with some background about the text: why the situation occurs, when and where it occurs, who the speakers are, what the topic is about, and any other necessary information. In this way, listeners have the opportunity to supply extra-linguistic information (based on their knowledge of the world) that is needed to understand what they hear. This must be done mainly when students lack complete knowledge about the situation they are about to hear, or when that knowledge differs totally from that which native speakers have. If any of these conditions is present, it will be difficult to participate actively in the listening task. On the contrary, if students have enough information in advance, they are more likely to take a more active role.

This preparatory phase to set the stage for listening might be carried out by: a) reading reference material related to the topic of listening, b) making predictions about possible information and events, as well as regarding relationships among events and characters, c) describing illustra-

tions related to the events d) discussing some aspects or the general topic of the text e) pre-teaching or reviewing some unfamiliar vocabulary that might cause difficulties for students.

B. Giving the students a purpose for listening.

Besides adding motivation for active involvement, a purpose helps the students concentrate on the relevant information they must listen to. It is important to take into account that whenever we listen consciously, we do it having a specific purpose in mind. If we listen to the news, for instance, we want to know what is taking place in the world. If we listen to a lecture, we might do it to learn more about the topic. Even when we listen to a joke or song, we have a definite purpose: enjoyment. The following are examples of purposes used to develop listening skills:

1. Understanding specific information.
2. Understanding general information.
3. Satisfying a cultural or personal interest.
4. Finding out about people's attitudes and opinions.
5. Looking for the organization of ideas.
6. Following the sequence of events.
7. Predicting and inferring information.
8. Identifying structural, functional, and lexical items.
9. Identifying characteristics of spoken English.

C. Assigning the students a real life task.

The task is what the students are supposed to do while or after listening, as a way of demon-

strating their degree of understanding. This type of activity not only provides active work in the listening practice, but also gives the students the opportunity to engage in a variety of activities, often demanding the use of other verbal, nonverbal, and graphic-type skills. The listening task can be one of any of the following kinds:

1. Performing a physical task: identifying or selecting pictures according to the information heard, following instructions and directions, organizing pictures in the correct sequence, locating items in the appropriate place on maps, graphs, ground plans, etc., drawing scenes or pictures based on what the listener understood from the listening text, or any other physical task that could be developed from the material presented.
2. Transferring information: taking notes, drawing a diagram, map, grid, list, table, etc., on which students have to label, complete or plot information.
3. Reformulating and evaluating information: Summarizing, discussing, creating suitable beginnings and ends of incomplete conversations or narratives, taking roles and performing the situations just heard, matching summary-sentences or pictures related to the text with one item or the general idea, note-taking in outline form, placing events and pictures in a correct order, giving an oral or written report, solving a problem, talking about pictures based on the information heard.

4. Answering questions: with particular or general items, inferences, predictions, etc. With regard to this type of task, it is important to point out that the traditional kind of true/false, multiple-choice, and some Wh-questions are not the best devices to check comprehension. They are appropriate to find out how much of the information heard is remembered, (memory), but they do not do too much to help the learners develop their ability to understand oral English. In addition with this type of exercises the students are not being encouraged to decode messages actively, unless they are faced with questions demanding inference or judgement of information.

These are only some of the many possible techniques which may be used to stimulate active, real-life listening, as opposed to listening exclusively for the purpose of performing unnatural, passive classroom exercises. This same type of meaningful activity is also applicable to reading comprehension. Purposeful listening comprehension activities must be created to accompany the texts used at the present time. With this overview of the nature of listening, its immediate methodological implications, and some procedures that might be used in the classroom, I hope to encourage the development of activities which increase listening competence of spoken English.

Virginia Angulo A.