

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION PRACTICAL SKILL CONDUCTED BY THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA.

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ABSTRACT:

In the University of Jaffna for the Undergraduates of Faculties of the Arts and Management Studies and Commerce English as a second language (ESL) is taught by the English language Teaching Centre (ELTC) to promote the general basic English language proficiency from 1st year to 3rd year. ESL is a compulsory component for the Arts and Management Studies and Commerce undergraduates. For the Faculty of Science undergraduates, even though they are highly motivated to learn English, when compared to the students of the Faculty of Arts students, ESL has been introduced as a compulsory component along with their main subjects up to second year in view of achieving the general basic English language proficiency.

To reach this goal ELTC provides training with all the four basic skills in relation to English language teaching with the available resources such as physical and human, within the University of Jaffna using formal teaching methods with eclectic style.

This paper specifically brings out the pedagogical implications of listening comprehension practical skill and provides suggestions for an effective ESL teaching programme.

01. INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka, English gradually gained a new status as a second language after the introduction of mother tongue as the medium of instruction for imparting the general education in all the government schools, particularly after Kannangara's recommendations in 1945. After the implementation of Educational Reformation Act 1950 English has been taught as a second language in almost all the government schools from 3rd standard onwards.

Generally in any foreign language learning process, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play an important role. But in recent years there has been a shift from an emphasis on intrinsic motivation to a concern with extrinsic factors. Before the Second World War people in the world learnt English for pleasure and prestige. English found its way into the regular timetables of a school or college regular timetable. In Sri Lanka also it was introduced in the similar way by the British government. This was known as 'General English'. It satisfied the intrinsic needs of the people. The goal of that kind of education was wide and general. It was considered that the purposes of

learning an additional language were to allow interaction with the rest of the world and for personal enjoyment.

But this situation gradually changed at the end of the World War in 1945. From this time onward expansion of scientific technical and economical activities on an international scale developed vastly. This situation generated a great demand for an international language. For various reasons most notably the economic power of the U.S.A in the Post World War, this role fell onto English. English was the key to the international currencies of technology and commerce. Since the British Empire had already transplanted English in its colonies (including Sri Lanka), English became the instrument of communication in the field of international trade.

At this stage a new generation of learners were created who understood why they were learning a language. For example businessmen and women who wanted to sell their products, advertise their products, mechanics who had to read instruction manuals, doctors and engineers who needed to keep abreast of new development in their respective fields.

Due to these influences the language teaching profession was brought under a pressure to provide required knowledge in English. This is called English for specific purposes (ESP). The chief principle of ESP is **'tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the kind of English that you need'**. These learners do not study English for personal enjoyment. They learn it because of the extrinsic factors based on instrumental needs.

In Sri Lanka, as mentioned previously, after 1950 English is taught as a compulsory second language. Thereafter these learners are also influenced by extrinsic factors. In Sri Lankan context, English as a second language is learnt and taught on the basis of extrinsic motivation to fulfill the instrumental needs. The instrumental needs of the Sri Lankan context are, reference reading (specially for the students), magazines reading, communicational needs within the country and with speech community of other languages other than Sri Lankan national languages (Sinhala/Tamil), need to hear and understand international sports news, and need to enhance the knowledge of Science and Technology.

As mentioned previously in the University of Jaffna, for the first year Arts and Management Studies and Commerce students ESL is taught throughout the two semesters in view of mastering four basic skills with general competency.

Before the commencement of the core ESL programme students are grouped. A placement test is conducted in ESL by the ELTC to identify the basic proficiency level of the new entrants. Even though it is not accepted in the modern ESL teaching trend, students are grouped according to their performance in the placement test for the departmental administrative purposes; for example assigning appropriate instructors to teach different groups comprising students of different levels of proficiency. Further, this grouping system will facilitate an instructor to carry out his ESL teaching programme successfully and plan according to the proficiency level of the groups.

For the academic year of 1999/2000 there were ten groups in the Faculty of Arts and six groups in the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce. Total ESL teaching hours available for the first and second semester are one hundred and fifty for Arts

and another one hundred and fifty for Management Studies and Commerce. Each Faculty has allocated thirty-five hours for the listening comprehension practical skills.

02. THEORETICAL ASSUMPTION

In ESL teaching programme, for a method to be economical as well as efficient it must be borne in mind that equal and simultaneous attention be focussed on all the four skills. Language teaching courses are very commonly designed with emphasis on four skills; speaking, listening (or understanding lectures/films/speech/ radio broadcasts / T.V.programmes), reading and writing.

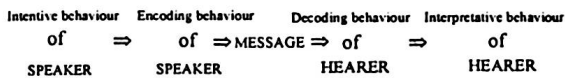
Basically, among these four skills listening and speaking are suggested to relate to language expressed through the aural medium and writing and reading are suggested to relate to language expressed through the visual medium. According to the activity of the language user, speaking and writing are called productive skills/active skills and listening and reading are said to be receptive/passive skills. Since this paper is primarily concerned of only listening practical skill in ESL

teaching/learning process it does not concentrate on other skills.

In the modern trend, teaching language for communicative purpose has become an accepted aim of the second language teacher all over the world. In this process what is expressed or communicated by a speaker/radio announcement and broadcasts/ T.V/lectures, etc. should be understood very clearly and accurately. If it is not so the user can't participate properly in a communication process. If a person does not understand what is communicated in a foreign language, he will not be able to respond properly. As a result a breakdown will occur in the communication; he has to face an embarrassing situation; perhaps it will lead him to considerable emotional fits.

Therefore, listening comprehension of spoken language is also given primary importance in a second language teaching/learning process. In the field of listening comprehension many communication engineers have carried out research using telephonic and telegraphic equipment and proved the needs of listening comprehension in a communication passage.¹

Many foreign language teaching planners also follow their models and interpret the usual communication system in a language speech situation. For example Carroll (1953:88) presents the following organismic communication model.



Earlier, English language teaching instructor when they teach it as a foreign language concentrated on the above model and applied it when they provided training to their student in listening comprehension. On the basis of the above model they made the students aware of the main aspects of the code (Vocabulary, phonological and morphological features, syntactical rules, etc.).

A student, while he learns his mother tongue, familiarizes himself with certain patterns of sound system in the mother tongue itself. Therefore, he has to face some difficulties when he learns any second language where different sound system are adopted. A student has to hear the new patterns, sequences with accepted loudness, pitch variation and length of pause. During

the course of time the student identifies the sound system and learns to recognize grouping of the above patterns as clues to meaning. In addition to sound sequences, human beings have the capacity to convey further elements of meaning by gesture, facial expression, little changes in breathing and degree of emphasis. Linguists call the above elements as paralanguage aspects. These aspects of a particular language also differ from speech community to speech community. No full comprehension of oral communication is complete without considering these aspects. For example socio-cultural elements can't be isolated from any language. Each language is associated with its own socio-cultural aspects. In the listening comprehension programme these aspects also must be incorporated to understand the language fully (e.g: pragmatic factors).

A. Listening comprehension process

A student while he is learning a foreign language moves through several stages in the comprehension of speech of that particular language. For the first time he will not identify any utterances of a foreign language. At this stage for him they will be

undifferentiated noises for him. During the course of time he will be able to make out some order in the noise. For instance, patterns in the pitch variation of voice and in the breath groups. Then a student identifies some of the associations of the particular language (verbs, vocabularies, etc.) and begins to differentiate the phonic and syntactic patterning. Anyhow this is not full comprehension. He has to reach the capacity of identifying the crucial elements. In the next stage he recognizes familiar elements in the mass of speech. Even now he is unable to find out the interrelationships within the total stream of sound.

In the final stage, that is after a length of practice, a student listens to more foreign language speech and acquires the level of making out the crucial aspects which determine the message. In brief, listening comprehension skill can't be achieved immediately. It requires considerable practice and time.

It is good to have a brief discussion on Broadbent's (1958) Theory of Memory and Retention. This will help to understand the stages while a student involves himself in

understanding listening comprehension practical exercises. According to him, a human being has a limited capacity for absorbing information. A set of information is at first filtered by the perceptual processes. Thereafter, the immediate memory of a human absorbs the above said filtered information. This is known as short-term storage mechanism. From this storage information will very easily go off if it is not recirculated through the perceptual steps at considerable intervals. Then only a little information is transferred to long-term storage in the memory. An instructor who is in charge of listening comprehension practical class for the ESL should understand the above theory and programme should be conducted accordingly.

B. Material for listening comprehension

As it has been mentioned previously no language basic skills should be taught in isolation. Achievement will be very high if listening comprehension activities are related to materials of other skills like reading and writing. For the initial stage materials are prepared in view of developing

the IDENTIFICATION skill of sounds along with the paralanguage elements such as stress, pitch and intonation. In the second stage also students are said to listen to a programme with moderate speed, ideally conversation or dialogue with normal everyday diction. At this stage materials are prepared in view of developing the skill of IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION WITHOUT RETENTION. This stage is applied only for the pleasure with no question to be answered.

In the third stage students are supplied with some questions beforehand. This will facilitate him to answer while he is listening to the programme. Material can be prepared with clearly distinctive voice with interested themes with the purpose of providing a practice on IDENTIFIED AND GUIDED SELECTION WITH SHORT - TERM RETENTION.

Finally, students are required to listen to all kinds of materials freely. For instance, a student may listen to drama, poems, lectures, pertinent to the interested subjects of the students, literary extracts, etc. This would be the advanced stage and provides training on IDENTIFICATION,

SELECTION, AND LONG-TERM RETENTION.

03. LISTENING COMPREHENSION AT THE E.L.T.C

From this academic year onwards (1999/2000) ELTC has commenced regular practical classes for listening comprehension for the Faculties of Arts and Management Studies and Commerce only for first year undergraduates. Out of the total one hundred and fifty ESL teaching hours, sixty hours are reserved for listening comprehension practical works. These hours are equally distributed to the ten groups of Arts ESL students and another sixty hours are also equally distributed to the six groups of Management and Commerce ESL students.

A. Physical resources

A special listening comprehension practical room is set up in view of the conduction of practical exercises. Twenty four separate individual booths are available in order to conduct the programme without any disturbances. Two audio speakers (out put-30 watts each) are permanently fixed at the centre of the two walls in order to enable

the students to hear from equal distance from both sides. Audio tape player is operated from the control table. To locate the countries a world map is fixed at the centre of the room. In order to reduce further noise students are requested to remove their footwear outside the practical room. This will avoid the collection of dust inside the programme hall, as well.

At the centre of the hall a T.V is placed on a stand. Selected films are shown to listen to native English with gestures, facial expression, etc. However, these movies are played for listening for pleasure with no questions to be answered.

B. Lessons for exercise

Altogether six lessons are designed for the two semesters. ELTC prepares its own lessons with Jaffna English pronunciation. The immediate purpose is to make the students understand Jaffna English with the moderate speed. Selected general themes are sports, international geography, English culture, world trade, scientific technology, etc. ELTC is planning to introduce subject oriented themes from second year onwards in future. Audio

recording is done in the ELTC with selected voice and low speed for the 1st semester. In the second semester normal speed is maintained when preparing the materials. Printed task sheets are distributed among the students, but they are advised to prepare their own task sheet to familiarize with spelling and structure.

C. Method

Before starting the lessons, the importance of listening comprehension skill in a language learning process is explained to the students and instruction on listening comprehension practical work is also given. At the initial stage bilingual medium is used in the hall, then gradually the medium is switched on to English with low speed.

Step 1

An audio tape, recorded in England is played in the listening comprehension hall. It is a conversation between an English and an American lady. The theme is about the general behaviour and the life style of an English and an American. General task of this exercise is to listen to English with the native pronunciation. After completing the first listening of the above tape, some

information in the contents of the conversation is recognized and students are requested to listen for the second time. During the fourth time they reach the capacity of making out 10-15 words in a ten minutes conversation. In between popular songs are played for the students' relaxation.

Step 2

Audio tape lesson 1 is played in the listening comprehension hall. Instruction for the lesson is also recorded. Students have to listen to the lesson and the questions for the first time. Thereafter, students are asked to complete their own task sheet. For this work 15-20 minutes is given. While the audio tape is played for the third time a considerable gap is applied between the sentences using pause button of the audio player. This will facilitate the slow listener to identify the necessary vocabulary. To check their answers tape is played for the fourth time. Thereafter, casual discussion is encouraged regarding the performance. This step will help the instructor to identify the problem of slow learners. If necessary, tape is played for the fifth time.

At the end of the class students are requested to submit their task sheet and

correction is made immediately. In the first lesson a general theme, which is world trade is incorporated and very simple questions using 'who' are asked in the first part of the task sheet. To reinforce the lesson a 'fill in the blanks' section is provided in the second part of the task sheet. This section will enable students to confirm the already known answers. This method is repeated for all lessons. The selected title for lesson two is **Normal life of people in Winfield**, for lesson three **Geography of Colorado**, lesson four **Geography of Zaire**, lesson five **Speed of sound** and finally for the sixth lesson **Geography of United States**.

D. Evaluation

Continuous in course assessment system is adopted to provide a total of 10 marks for all the six lessons out of 100 marks of ESL. No examination is conducted for listening comprehension following the traditional method. While they participate and submit their task sheet, students are assessed and marks are recorded. Regular counselling also takes place while conducting the practical classes for improvement. Since it is an informal evaluation system with practical works, the

effectiveness can be measured. This approach allows the students to participate individually and it is a student centred programme. They are allowed to discuss freely after the programme. Slow learners learn from fast learners. Therefore, they are able to perform well. Further, this evaluating system will not affect any slow learners. The outcome is comparatively very high unlike formal evaluation system.

E. Limitations

The available equipment are not enough to produce quality audio tapes at the ELTC. There is danger in audial quality deterioration if the equipment are not up to the required out-put power. Since the primary task is discriminating the sound system of a language, audial quality should be maintained.

For each lesson visual accompaniment is of vital importance as explained previously. This will enable the students to make out the paralanguage aspects since they play a key role in a successful communication. Further it will create a sense of reality. ELTC is unable to produce this type of programme at present.

Motivating the students towards this programme seems extremely difficult since they are not familiar with this type of programme. Regular attendance is neglected by the students. The responsibility of the students appears very poor. ELTC attendant sheets prove this overtly. To give chances for the absentees ELTC conducts repeat programmes also.

04. CONCLUSION

ELTC tries to create an artificial English language atmosphere to enhance the exposure of the students to English language. Lessons are prepared within the theoretical framework and refashioned to suit the class room needs. Since lessons are recorded at the ELTC, it can accommodate the necessary speed matching the class room needs. However, the producers should concentrate on systematic style of the particular language. While producing the materials here at the ELTC, there is a possibility of selecting familiar themes of the students. This will help to motivate the students towards the practical classes. As far as ESL programme of the ELTC is concerned, listening comprehension regular practical classes are entirely new. It is introduced in

view of improving the ESL proficiency of the students. The listening skill practical hall set up at the ELTC differs from traditional classroom. Therefore, participating rate of the students in the total ESL learning process will be promoted. The existing programme is more or less close to the principle of student centered one. Students are able to concentrate, participate systematically and complete their work individually. Instructor functions as an operator of audio system and speaks if there is a need only. This type of student centered activity leads to his entire satisfaction and achievement rate of the language competency seems very high. Though motivation for English language learning in general is low, ELTC listening

comprehension programme helps to improve it rapidly. Very frequently ELTC invites instructors to observe the above programme. In future their valuable suggestions will be incorporated when preparing materials for the listening comprehension. ELTC is taking measures to extend this programme to the second and third year in the future.

FOOTNOTE

01. From W. Weaver, "**Recent Contribution to the Mathematical Theory of Communication**" in C.E.Shannon and W.Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana, Ill., 1949), p.98.

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