

Using Listening Comprehension as a Scaffolding Technique

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Abstract

The pervasive presence of the smart phone in classrooms today has encouraged and influenced both teachers and learners as co participants in the learning process. The usage of Listening Comprehension as a deliberate strategy and a guided activity with mental modelling in the ESL classroom promotes improved levels of English usage among graduate students. The paper makes an attempt to demonstrate how recorded audios, Ted ex Talks and pod casts can be used in Listening comprehension as scaffolding tools to enhance the learning of language.

Key Words: Listening, language learning, Scaffolding Technique

The pervasiveness and use of the mobile and smart phone in our classrooms is an undeniable truth. We need to develop strategies enabling facilitators to modify teaching practices and permit both teachers and learners to be co participants in the learning process. Listening is a crucial skill and should be widely used to develop language competence in undergraduate classrooms especially as it promotes higher order skills such as analysing, logical reasoning, and evaluating. Listening comprehension includes understanding the spoken language which involves identifying speech sounds, comprehending individual words, and finally interpreting the syntax of sentences in which they are accessible as a collective whole. O'Malley, Chamot and Kuper (1989 as cited in Pourhossein, Gilakjani & Ahmadi 2011) have referred to listening comprehension as an active process in which the listener constructs meaning through using cues from contextual information and existing knowledge while relying upon numerous strategic resources

to perform the task requirement. Listening Comprehension using the mobile is a tool where multiple interesting ways of learning can be achieved, it encourages learner autonomy and supports different learning styles, visual or auditory.

The following questions guided this research. Will the undergraduate students accustomed to traditional methods of study find this technique more interesting? Does comprehension of the material in the audios and videos actually aid them in learning? Can they understand and respond to both native and non native English? Could I make them understand that this was an effective way of improving Listening skills?

David Crystal remarked with the spread of English as an international language, it is currently used by more non-native speakers than native speakers (2000:2004). The requirement for enhanced levels of English usage and an improved impact on learner outcomes among our students is a constant truism we are

striving for in our classrooms. In this paper I have attempted to use with listening comprehension, certain scaffolding techniques to encourage independent learning and ultimately achieve higher levels of comprehension and skill acquisition. An endeavour has also been made to adopt the concept of flipped classrooms to increase the students' interactive skills, and enable a form of blended learning where the learners too take responsibility by combining the traditional delivery of education with online or digital educational components.

Extensive work on developing Listening and Speaking skills with the use of mobile technology has been done by Liang and Huang (2014) and Liu and Chu (2010). Learning language through literature necessitates a supplementation of course books with additional study material by teachers to meet changing learning outcomes. With cheap mobile handsets and easily available networking systems, the digital natives of today live what Swenson et al. (2006) summarized as digital-media-saturated lives. It is important for the teacher today to integrate this understanding in the classroom and bring out an appropriate and meaningful method of teaching, changing standardized patterns.

The Experiment-Common concerns shared by teachers of English are, having students who possess only a photocopied version of the course book with no additional reading, as today, they rarely go beyond the prefixed given syllabus. This article outlines listening experiments using mobiles which was conducted with the second and final year undergraduate students and was a result of her attempting to integrate this much used device with

learning systems. Along with the videos which were vetted and guided audios, using scaffolding techniques, there was also an attempt to enable students to access their skill competencies at different levels. Scaffolding is defined as the temporary assistance by which a teacher helps a learner know how to do something so that the learner will be able to complete a similar task alone. (Gibbons: 2002:10) Listening was emphasised and students were encouraged to write down incomprehensible words, facts and figures to assist them in the answering process.

The third semester in the SNTD Women's University includes a module on Listening comprehension which is tested for ten marks. I started with the second year students from the Hindi medium (totalling 110) by introducing videos from Ted Ed Talks which had both audio and video content. The topics were of general interest, "How the food you eat affects your brain", "How to introduce yourself quickly", "The benefits of a good night's sleep", "How to practice effectively... for just about anything" The students were allowed to listen to these short videos twice after which there was an interactive session where, by asking questions, I tried to test their understanding. At this point they were allowed to have any query about the content or even word meanings and were encouraged to jot down points. Armed with this information, they were allowed to listen a third time after which they had to keep away their handsets and I would then test their understanding by boarding questions from the video. The responses and levels of understanding were encouraging and a broad understanding was noticed. In cases where they did not understand the question, a

quick rephrasing almost always elicited correct answers. Surprisingly, despite the native English accents, students answered questions accurately. After we worked with several videos, I allowed them to listen twice, stopped them from asking questions and continued with a testing session where I outlined objective questions like True and False & Choose the Correct Answer. Objective questions removed the fear of testing and concentrated listening brought in greater clarity and they gradually became receptive. Students were allowed to do pair work with their friends if they did not possess a phone, had a basic model or did not have a data pack. The app “Share it” enabled every student to have equal levels of accessibility. While vetting the videos, care was taken to see that the content would be familiar, interesting and also that the accent, intonation and vocabulary used by the speaker was not too different or difficult from the knowledge and acceptance level of the students. The duration of the recorded audios and videos was also approximately 5-7 minutes, an aspect crosschecked meticulously to avoid boredom. The next step was testing their receptivity with short stories. I introduced *Summer Vacation* by Kamala Das by discussing about green Kerala, hot summer vacations in school and showed images from Google about the huge houses with courtyards, the clothes worn by people and the food. The visuals made the sessions very interesting as the students began sharing pictures they sourced from Google or personal resources. Though the setting, theme, situations were pan Indian many aspects of life led in our own country was new to them. After teaching around three pages which took about two lectures, I recorded one page as an experiment. When

recording I used mental modelling while narrating (details are attached in the *Appendix*). I used the process deliberately to inform the learner how she could think about the story aloud while negotiating through the text, which she could process and then learn by imitation. I found I was often pausing as we would in conversational speech while clarifying meanings which I assumed they would need. After listening to the short audio twice they quickly skimmed through the already explained part in the text. I wanted my students to listen for particular information, which would enable them to respond in their examinations instead of trying to understand every single word. They made conscious attempts to decipher the meaning of the difficult words themselves and find out how they were related to the text. According to Ur (1991), “A good listening exercise should contain informal speech in the sense that it is not a written text read out loud, but speech which has grammatical flaws, slurred pronunciation, colloquial vocabulary, redundancy of words and background noise.”

Excited, I taught another short story to forty, third year Marathi medium students using the same preparatory procedure. The story, *Green Parrots in a Cage* by Gopi Gauba was challenging as it had a psychological angle and was set during the Partition. I sourced videos on Partition from You Tube which I sent on their WhatsApp groups and built up the vocabulary content of the students with words like “violence, bloodshed, anger, gory killings, rampage, carnage, threat, fear” to explain the charged atmosphere of the times. After discussing the first page I sent a recording in the class. I meet them

for two lectures and in a time frame of hundred minutes much can be achieved. I did not pause for explanations but moved on to two other recordings of the chapter. I had deliberately left out the climax. The students heard the recording twice which took a total of forty minutes and then after a brief break, I instructed them to skim through the chapter. I next clarified their doubts and vocabulary, quickly moving through the narrative and built on the climax, explaining it line by line.

The outcome - My stakeholders were positive and remarked that the experiments were enjoyable and interesting as apprehension about not comprehending the language was resolved. They were charged about using their mobile phones constructively and openly and it was extremely encouraging for me especially because along with their increased interest there was greater class control. The length of the story being thirteen pages I completed teaching the entire narrative in four lectures, managing to complete the story in much less time than I would have, had I taught it in my usual style. Another advantage I noticed was even if I gave detailed explanations, I was spending a TTT (Teacher Talk Time) of approximately five minutes per page whereas in the class I would sometimes complete the same in twenty or even thirty minutes with often one sided explanations from my side only. Again, as I had control over the recording I consciously resisted using their native language and spoke only in English, constantly simplifying words and also getting them to guess. This was unlike the scene in class where to promote understanding and also maintain class discipline I would often use the other tongue to provide a quick and accurate

translation of an English word which would take several minutes for me to explain.

On quizzing the students, I found improved understanding and an increased receptivity to formulate better answers. I did a mix of multiple choice and brief descriptive questions which gave them the liberty to answer using their own words. They were enthused and did not miss the direct explanations given earlier. I was happy that the teaching learning process seemed smooth and successful and I could go beyond Chalk and Talk even with such a large group. The students found this entire process highly interactive, had greater clarity, more accessibility to the text and I discovered active, engaged, responsible learners and an improved learner-centric approach. By actively participating and improving their memory skills, learners progress in listening and learning the second language. These methods stimulate and improve learning. Though lessons are teacher directed they are student centred. Instead of merely ingesting content and responding only when solicited which was often not possible in such large classes, students were pushed to greater interaction with the text and the tasks. While recording I would pause at difficult words and discuss it. The students were encouraged to think over the difficult words in the body of the discourse, enabling them to negotiate for meaning within the text, independently or in pairs. Mental modelling practised in this way was thus an invisible act, enabling an understanding of difficult vocabulary. Working in pairs was a supporting factor and the mental modelling method enabled flexibility. The addition of visual cues through images and videos also increased

the test scores of each individual adding to higher levels of positivity and a desire by students to experiment further. The teacher in these experiments becomes like a manipulator, drawing out responses from the students gradually from simple to complex questions, using questions, commands and other cues and attempting to elicit correct responses.

Recording the audio was a challenge because I had to maintain consistency in the rendering, break off after a 5-6 minute delivery with a plausible ending and continue again keeping the urge in students to respond and listen to the recording. A study conducted by Woottipong (2014) showed that "The students' English listening comprehension ability increased significantly after learning with videos and students had positive attitudes towards using videos in teaching listening skills" (p. 200). Woottipong's survey concluded that many students found it helpful as they had studied some relevant words before the listening exercise, as it, of course, helped them understand the video better. Although this study took university students as its subjects, I realised it would be true also for the students I tested.

Limitations:

The research has certain limitations and the experimenter confesses that it is only a beginning to introduce the smart phone in the teaching environment. An experimental group and a control group were not used for purpose of the experiment, neither could I conduct a pre test and post test. Thirdly, knowledge

about the efficacy of the teaching methodology from students was verbal.

However, it is a definite truism that these modes of teaching can and will encourage students to learn the language interactively, constructively and with greater interest. As a methodology it is important if both the student and the teacher do not initially emphasise much on the testing as it might make the student conscious. With guidance and practice there can be improvement. Though Gass and Veronis (1984) claim that familiarity with accent in addition to being familiar with the topic and the speaker aids listening comprehension, it was noted that videos by native speakers did not actually cause a problem.

Conclusion:

As a mental and emotional tool, listening helps in overseeing, directing or regulating strategies towards a language learning process. Research findings have demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of communication time listening, 25-30% time speaking, 11-16% time reading and 9% time writing which proves that listening is the most common and important communicative activity in daily life. It is necessary that students be made aware of listening as an activity which necessitates active engagement and encourages positive learning. Studies claim that a child's listening level is approximately two years beyond his or her reading abilities. Emphasising that this makes it imperative that we foster Listening and Speaking Skills in the classroom, I hereby rest my case.

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Appendix 1- Summer Vacation by Kamala Das from *The Inner Courtyard* (Ed) Lakshmi Holmstrom Pg 28-29

Some women came to visit Muthasshi. Seeing me, they asked, 'Isn't this your daughter's child? Muthasshi objected to this catechism.' Who else could she be? Do you imagine I would keep other people's children in my house?'

The women laughed in a conciliatory fashion.

'Of course we recognised her, but we thought we should ask. That's all. Who brought her home? Has Velayudha Menon come as well?'

'No. He brought her as far as Trichur. He wasn't able to get leave.

Transcript of Audio Recording-

So one day some neighbouring ladies came to visit Muthasshi. When they saw Ammu they asked whether she was her daughter's child. But Ammu objected. . . this also means protest, to the catechism. What can this mean? Does it mean in simple words question. . . because the women asked a question. And Muthassi protested to that. Why, was it wrong? Try to understand Muthasshi's voice when she says Do you imagine I would keep other people's

children in my house?’ It shows a little anger and somewhere her position in the society, remember she belonged to a rich family. Let us continue. The women laughed in a conciliatory fashion. What can conciliatory mean? She was rich, they had come to meet her. Does it mean they were trying to agree with her, to please her by laughing to show she was right? Let us read ahead. We have another character. Velayudha Menon. Who is he? Listen to the next line, the reply by Muthasshi. No. He brought her as far as Trichur. He wasn’t able to get leave. So what do you think is the relationship between Ammu and Velayudha Menon? He bought her till a particular place. Why is that? He came till Trichur only. Let us listen some more. . .