

Book Talk: An Innovative Method to Develop Listening and Reading Skills

Dr. L. V. Padmarani Rao

Associate Professor, PG Department of English and Research Centre

Yeshwant Mahavidyalaya, Nanded, (M.S.) India

Abstract

English has been in India for more than two centuries and influenced the teaching priorities of the languages in the Indian education system. All good relationships are based on effective communication and listening plays a very important role in it. Good listeners are good speakers as one could see in the case of a child picking up its mother tongue. But in a second language teaching-learning situation, listening is taken for granted as it is a passive skill. But listening is not a natural process and it involves a careful training to the learners. Reading also is an important skill with the help of which one understands various things of the world. Reading is a part and parcel of everyday lives; right from the reading of a newspaper in the morning, to the reading of magazines and journals, reading textbooks and notes, one reads something or the other throughout the day. However, it should be noted that only by practice one can become an effective listener and a good reader. Reading and listening are considered to be passive skills of language learning but unless these passive skills are properly trained for, the active skills of speaking and writing becomes paralysed.

The present paper aims at developing Listening and Reading skills among Second Language Learners of English at the undergraduate level. The paper is the documentation of a practical experiment done by the researcher in the college where she has been teaching English for the past few decades.

Key Words: Book talk, innovative methods, listening skills, reading skill

Introduction

English is one of the most widely accepted languages for wider communication. It has become a global language rather than the language of its native speakers because the number of people who use English as a means of communication exceeds much more than the number of people who speak it as their mother tongue. The statistics collected by Crystal, David shows that nearly 670 million people use English with fluency and competency (61). This figure is steadily growing ever since 1990. Due to its status as a global language, it is indispensable to teach and learn English in

India. The Secondary Education Commission (1952) and the three language policy of the Kothari Commission (1967) aimed at making English an integral part of the education in India.

The primary aim of teaching English is to enable the students master the basic skills of language ability namely Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. There are a number of sub-skills under these broad skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, which have to be carefully cultivated in the process of teaching. Of the four skills important to develop a language, like Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, Listening and

Reading are passive skills while Speaking and Writing are active skills. They are named so because Listening and Reading are subjective and are associated with individual understanding and comprehension, whereas Speaking and Writing are associated with the expression of oneself with others. If Listening and Reading are intrapersonal communication to the self, Speaking and Writing are interpersonal communication.

Sub-skills of listening

- Distinguish the characteristics of English sounds
- Understand different stress and intonation patterns
- Guessing at unknown words or phrases
- Understanding speakers' intentions
- Using previous knowledge for better understanding
- Recognising discourse markers and cohesive devices used in speech

Sub-skills of speaking

- Produce various sounds and clusters of sounds
- Use proper stress patterns, pauses and intonation to express different emotions
- Use appropriate words and sentence patterns
- Speak intelligibly with different people
- Use of different speech patterns in formal and informal situations

Sub-skills of reading

- Read the passage silently and fast with comprehension
- Recognise words and phrases in the English language
- Using previous knowledge to understand the text

- Understand the central idea of the passage
- Locate key words, key phrases and key sentences present in the passage
- Guess the meaning of new words in context
- Extracting information using skimming and scanning
- Give a suitable title to the passage

Sub-skills of writing

- Write grammatically correct sentences
- Use appropriate words, phrases and sentence patterns
- Follow a logical sequence in writing
- Organize writing in paragraphs
- Avoid unnecessary repetition
- Write with correct spelling and punctuation marks

Listening and speaking demand the exercise of the auditory (ears) and speech (mouth). Therefore these skills are called aural-oral skills and they go hand in hand. Reading and writing involve the visual (printed text) and the psychomotor (mind) organs and hence they go hand in hand.

Listening Skill: Listening is the first activity that a learner is exposed to when s/he is placed in a language environment. Even though listening is a receptive skill, it is critical to effective communication. Poor listening may lead to misunderstandings and arguments among people. There is a difference between listening and hearing. Hearing is an involuntary activity where the sounds on the street or somebody crying outside or a street fight or a radio song are automatically heard. But listening is a voluntary activity where all the senses are to be concentrated to listen and comprehend as in the case of a classroom lecture or a talk/a discussion or news on radio/T.V. and the like. Listening is a

voluntary process with three stages-hearing, processing and evaluating. Active and attentive listening is what any speaker wants from the listener for effective communication.

Identifying the sounds of a language is the first sub-skill of listening. The sounds are grouped into meaningful words which in turn combine to form syntactic units like phrases, clauses and sentences. A good listener not only identifies and comprehends the words and sentences of the language but also interprets stress, rhythm and intonation of the language. Another sub-skill of listening is to identify the information or the gist conveyed by the message. Identification of emotional and attitudinal tone of the speaker is also a sub-skill of a good listener which makes him/her a perfect communicator. In fact, listening and speaking are the two sides of the same coin and both are very closely inter-related. Listening can be casual listening and focused listening. Casual listening is passive and refers to the listening without any particular purpose while focused listening is active and has a purpose.

There are several factors affecting listening comprehension like the following.

- Linguistic factors
- Physical factors
- Psychological factors

Linguistic factors deal with the listener's language proficiency, for example the vocabulary, pronunciation, understanding of homonyms and homophones etc. Physical factors deal with the environmental interference like the noise, crowd and technological disturbance like interference in a radio broad cast or on a

telephone network. Psychological factors that affect listening are a person's pre-occupation in other thoughts, privileges and prejudices of a person, lack of interest on the topic, impatience etc. Hence active listening takes place only when the listener is mentally free and is in a receptive mood.

For effective listening, keeping aside the physical and psychological distractions and one needs to listen to the speaker appropriately. Empathise with the speaker and carefully listen to understand rather than to oppose. Show interest in whatever one is listening to, and ask questions to show that the listener is interested in the conversation. Develop verbal and non-verbal listening abilities and listen with an open mind. Go easy on arguments and criticism and appreciate the speaker's views which you agree with, where up on, the speaker would be put to ease and effective communication takes place.

There are different barriers to listening, some of which are as following.

- Listener thinks s/he knows more than the speaker.
- Listener is stress filled because of physical or psychological pressures.
- Listener is anxious to express his/her own thoughts.
- Listener is prejudiced about the speaker.
- Speaker is confused himself/herself.
- Speaker uses technical jargon.
- Speaker is not effective in communicating the ideas.
- Speaker uses words open to many interpretations.
- There are external disturbances.

A good listener should have the following qualities for proper listening and for effective communication.

- A good listener should be proficient in the language in which communication is taking place.
- A good listener should follow the speaker carefully.
- A good listener should clarify the meanings from the speaker immediately.
- A good listener knows to interpret the sentence in a context.
- A good listener is knowledgeable and confident.
- A good listener should be actively involved in listening activity.
- A good listener is never over-anxious and is not in a hurry to know what the speaker says.
- A good listener is patient, calm and positive.

A good listener is one who involves actively in listening and is critical about what he listens to. S/he uses various strategies to overcome the barriers.

Reading Skill: In fact Reading is an active process which involves the reader's interaction with the text. Many a times, the reader's eyeballs must be moving across the text, reading the words and sentences but understand nothing. This especially happens when one reads a book not related to the area of study or interest. Say for example a literature student is reading a book in Bio-Technology or Microbiology or a Commerce student is reading a book in Criticism or Critical Theory. What is important is interest in the subject and a sufficient background knowledge about the subject. Hence there is a constant interaction between the reader and the text in comprehending the text which has the following activities associated.

- Recognizing the letters of a language.

- Identifying the meanings of words.
- Understanding the relation among the constituents of a sentence.
- Comprehending the overtly stated information.
- Inferring the information, which is not overtly stated?
- Getting the general idea of a text.
- Interpreting the text.

There are different types of Reading like loud reading and silent reading. In fact different types of texts demand different types of reading. In the day to day life reading activity is observed in the following ways.

- Letters, notes, telegrams, e-mails, sms.
- Newspaper, magazines, brochures, catalogues.
- Telephone directories, railway / bus timetables.
- Essays, articles, reviews, reports.
- Short stories, novels, dramas, poems, diaries.
- Advertisements, graphs, charts, maps, atlas, pictures.
- Encyclopaedias, dictionaries, thesaurus.

Each of the texts given above is unique—some are with words, some are with pictures, some are with both words and pictures, some are with graphics and so on. Reading involves comprehending every form of representation.

Essentially, there are two purposes of reading – pleasure and information. While reading a story, a poem or a novel, one reads it for pleasure. The same happens while reading personal letters, essays and articles in the area of one's interest. But while reading a newspaper, a telephone directory or a dictionary, it is for information that one does so. For instance,

a short story of Edgar Allan Poe or Khushwant Singh is read for pleasure where up on one doesn't memorize any part of it and one does not give importance to information. But if the same story is prescribed as a text in the academics, the attitude to look at the story differs. One starts reading it carefully for the plot, characters, and theme and so on. So it is not reading it for pleasure but to get the information about the writer and his work as a part of curriculum. Normally, people are always driven by a desire to read something for either pleasure or extracting information. If both pleasure and information are together in the reading of a text, people can enjoy and retain the information in a pleasure filled manner.

Reading could be more effective and long remembering if one takes into consideration, the sub skills of reading. Skimming, Scanning, Extensive Reading and Intensive Reading are the four different types based on the way reading is done.

Skimming:

Skimming is an activity in which the reader's eyes run over a text quickly to get a general idea or gist of it. In a book exhibition, one doesn't read all the books in an exhibition or the entire book taken in hand but s/he picks up a book, looks at the author, its contents, reads the back page and flips the pages of the book by reading preface and introduction so as to get an idea about the book. Then the reader decides whether to buy it or not. This is what one does when one goes to a library for borrowing a book. Such an activity of quickly going through the book in order to get a general idea about the book is called as skimming.

Scanning:

Scanning refers to reading for specific information. While searching for a word 'TEACH' in a dictionary one need not start the search from the words starting with 'A', on the contrary, one goes to the letter 'T' and then to the page with 'TE' and then to the letters 'TEA' etc. The reader just runs his/her eyes on the pages of the dictionary till s/he locates the right word. The same thing happens when one is searching for the time of departure in a railway timetable or bus timetable. This activity of quickly going to the right information is called scanning.

Extensive Reading:

Extensive Reading refers to the reading of longer texts like novels and short stories, which take longer time period to read. They are read a bit faster by skipping a few pages here and there and this is so because the reader is interested in getting a global idea of the entire text. This is usually done for pleasure.

Intensive reading:

Intensive reading is a careful reading and re-reading of texts especially the research articles, lessons prescribed in the curriculum, thesis, dissertations and projects. Intensive reading involves in extracting specific information and ensures complete comprehension.

The purpose of reading is very important to decide on the speed of reading. The research papers, legal documents etc. require a slow and careful reading while newspaper articles, stories etc require a faster reading where the eyes grasp phrases / clauses / sentences. Whatever speed does one maintain in reading, 100% comprehension of the text is what is very

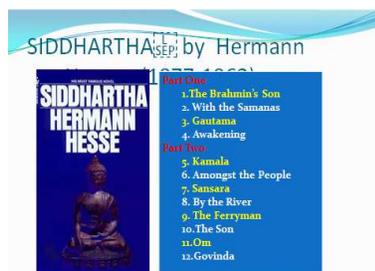
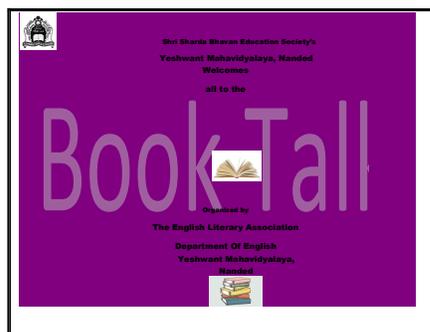
important. A good reader needs to guess the meanings of new words with respect to the context of use, she / he also needs to guess the intention of the writer, the overall idea of the text, what paragraphs to read intensively and what to read extensively. A good reader maintains an average speed of 250-500 words per minute but varies often depending up on the text s/he is reading. Some of the faulty habits of reading like the following are to be avoided.

- Pointing the words of the text with a pencil or your finger.
- Pronouncing the words mentally.
- Mouthing the words audibly using lip movements.
- Moving the head from one side to another instead of using the eye movement.
- Perceiving only one word at a time.
- A back ward eye movement along a time.

A good reader not only understands the text but also goes beyond the text and thinks critically about the text.

The Practise:

English Literary Association of Yeshwant Mahavidyalaya, Nanded organized a **BOOK TALK** on the Nobel Prize winning book titled “**SIDDHARTHA**”, by Hermann Hesse from 06 March to 10 March, 2019, in the e-learning centre, Department of English of the college at 11.30 am every day. Sixty students from B. A. B.Com. B.Sc. and M.A. English–both the parts participated in the book talk.



The teacher would read the text chapter by chapter by concentrating on all the important aspects of the novel and the students need to listen and comprehend the text. In between, the teacher would leave space or blank, which the students need to complete with suitable words. This is to alert the students and check their listening skills. Each day two chapters were covered and the students were deeply immersed in

the very philosophical text of Hermann Hesse' *Siddhartha*.

After reading the text for four days, when eight chapters from the text were taken care of, the teacher stopped the text and declared that the remaining part of the text should be read by the students during the weekend and come with their talk on the conclusion of the text. The text is easily available to the students on net both hard

and soft copies. Moreover, the hard copy of the text was provided to the students for ready use. The students enjoyed the reading of the text and the classroom discussion of the text encouraged all the students to actively participate.

The activity of BOOK TALK is to be carried out with Nobel prize winning/Sahitya Academy winning/Booker Prize winning English text per semester so that the student would be acquainted with Nobel laureates/Sahitya Academy winners/Booker Prize Winners and their texts along with developing listening and reading skills of English effectively.

Discussion: Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) is one of the most popular Western novels set in India, which deals with the spiritual journey of self-discovery of a man named Siddhartha during the time of the Gautama Buddha. In Hesse's novel, experience of life in the present moment and comprehending the totality of conscious events of a human life, is shown as the best way to the understanding of reality and attain enlightenment. Hesse's crafting of Siddhartha's journey shows that understanding is attained not through intellectual methods, nor through immersing oneself in the carnal pleasures of the world and the accompanying pain of samsara. It is the completeness of these experiences that allows Siddhartha to attain understanding. Thus, the individual events are meaningless when considered by themselves—Siddhartha's stay with the Samanas and his immersion in the worlds of love and business do not lead to nirvana, yet they cannot be considered distractions, for every action and event gives Siddhartha an experience, which leads to understanding. A major

preoccupation of Hesse in writing *Siddhartha* was to cure his "sickness with life" and understand existential notion of life by immersing himself in Indian philosophy such as that expounded in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

The novel is structured on three of the traditional stages of life for Hindu males - student (brahmachari), householder (grihastha) and recluse/renunciate (vanaprastha)) through the character of Siddhartha. The four truths of life and the eight fold path of Buddhism are perfectly merged into the categories of **precepts, meditation and wisdom**; and that the path of practice of Buddhism is the Three Vehicles of Learning that are artistically reflected in the text are well acknowledged by the students. By following the precepts one learns to control the body and mind. Through meditation one learns to unify the mind. Wisdom is attained by the practice of the above two and through this wisdom all ignorance and passions are cut off and true state of Enlightenment is then realized. *Siddhartha* enunciates these twelve principles of Buddhism in a simple and straight forward way.

Conclusion: Different Commissions and Committees put forward their investigated result that English teachers are the most powerful instruments in bringing about any reform in English Language Teaching. Despite of many efforts taken by the educationists, syllabus framers, teachers and institutional heads in the second language learning situations, majority of the students struggle hard to find the right expression in their written and spoken form of English communication. Listening and reading such texts enable the learners to comprehend the existential notions of literature and life; along with

developing the skills of the language. As the texts are not prescribed, the learners don't feel the stressed out for reading and speaking/listening to it. A little bit of motivation enables the SL learners to develop interest in the listening and

reading skill of English texts which is dwindling across the time. With phonetic and grammatical correction in their expression, they could improve their speaking and writing skills as well.

References:

- Abbot, G. and Wingard, P. *The Teaching of English as Foreign Language*. London: Collins, 1981. Print.
- Brumfit, C.J., and K. Johnson. *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. Print.
- Crystal, David. *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.
- Dwivedi, R.K. and A. Kumar, *Macmillan Foundation English*. Chennai: Macmillan, 2001. Print.
- Krishnaswami, N. and T. Sriraman. *English Teaching in India*. Madras: DR Publishers, 1994. Print.
- Nagarajan, Geetha. *English Language Teaching: Approaches, Methods, Techniques*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 1996. Print.
- Wright, A., D. Betteridge, and M. Buckby. *Games for Language Learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.