

## Listening: Types, Strategies and Activities to Develop Communication Skills among ESL Learners

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#### Abstract

Listening facilitates learning and empowers people. Half of our communication time is spent on listening. However for years, listening has been an ignored skill despite its crucial role in communication. Communication in English can be hindered if the speaker does not know how to use the right words in the right situations. Listening involves abstracting a message from a stream of sounds. The message then goes through a cognitive process after which the listener can provide an appropriate response to the speaker. The brain cannot produce words, never heard before. Even just hearing the words is insufficient. Students can learn English and improve their communication skills only if they hear the words as part of a context and are aware of the purpose of listening. This article focuses on the factors of listening skills that are essential to enhance listening skills. The pointers here discuss the various types of listening and its purposes, strategies to develop listening skills, the format to conduct listening sessions, and different types of activities to practice listening skills which in turn will improve students' communication.

**Key Words:** Types of listening, Strategies, Listening Skills, Communication, ESL and Listening session format

#### Introduction

Studies suggest that people spend almost 55% of their day listening (Wolvin, 137). Listening is essential to gain fluency across all languages. It plays a critical role in developing English language skills. However it is a skill that is usually not taught in schools and colleges in a formal way. As all the skills are interlinked, absence of listening skill can stunt the development of English speaking skills too. These days, fluency in English communication is the basic requirement in an interview. Also, listening is among the

top three skills that the employers look for in an employee, as it leads to organizational success (Wolvin, 137). Listening skills brings about cohesion and increases motivation in a work environment. Good listeners can lead to a positive communication atmosphere. It is also a skill which will help an individual to stand out in a crowd by being able convey her/his thoughts and ideas confidently. It is a crucial element to fulfil day to day activities. It is essential for the purpose of performing well academically, interacting with colleagues at work place and building

relationships. On the other hand, success in the academic field or the professional life could be quite challenging if one possesses poor listening skills.

### 1. The Process of Listening

The International Listening Association gave recognition to the following definition of listening: "Listening: the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/ or nonverbal messages" (Purdy & Borisoff, 6 as qtd in Adelman, 515). A good listener is always mentally alert, identifies the purpose for listening, listens to the speaker completely, focuses on the meaning and not just the message, can distinguish between observation and inferences, restates thoughts, looks out for the signal words, creates a positive atmosphere and responds to the feelings as well as the content of a message (Arivudayapan, 20). This cannot take place without sufficient training, as is the case in the present scenario.

Listening as a skill has been ignored for a very long time as people believed that listening did not require learning, and it can be acquired naturally without putting an effort. Purdy and Borisoff in their book *Listening in Everyday Life* highlight the following points about listening:

1. It could be learnt.
2. It is an active process involving the mind and body working along with verbal and nonverbal processes.
3. It motivates us to be considerate towards the needs, concerns and information conveyed by others.

While hearing is part of listening, it is only the first step. Comprehending what was heard requires a process and does not stop at the first step of hearing. The process of listening involves three steps. Firstly, the

listeners receive the aural stimuli sometimes combined with the visual stimuli. Secondly the listeners distinguish between what is important and what is just distraction in the stimuli. Finally, the listeners comprehend the stimuli and assign meaning to the speakers' message. The listener function sometimes varies based on the listeners' goal as well as the speakers' intention while communicating (Wolvin, 138).

The following paragraphs discuss the types, strategies and the activities to develop listening skills. The final part points out the structure for effective listening sessions.

### 2. Types of listening

For listening to become meaningful the learners need to be aware of the purpose of listening. Doing this allows the listeners to know what to expect for, in the listening task. Listening without a purpose can lead the students in just hearing the information and not comprehending it. To meet this goal the students need to be aware of the listening type, as every listening type fulfils a different purpose.

#### Active Listening

Active listening is listening with a purpose (Barker10). Good eye contact, making reference to what was mentioned earlier, asking probing questions are behaviours that play a role in active listening. Rost categorizes the elements of active listening pedagogy into four types. 1. Global listening which involves deriving the gist from the listening text. 2. Intensive listening which stresses specific features of the listening material. 3. Selective listening where the emphasis is on abstracting information and assigning meaning to complete a specific task. 4. Interactive

listening focuses on interacting with the speaker to reach a common goal (50).

#### *Approach*

- Pay attention and avoid distraction
- Repeat words mentally to reinforce the message
- Maintain nonverbal conversational involvement

#### *Activity*

- The teacher decides on a topic and starts talking about it.
- After speaking a few sentences the teacher asks the first person on the first bench to continue sharing thoughts on the same topic. The first student speaks a few sentences, then the next student is asked to speak, continuing thoughts on the topic started by the teacher.
- Once the students become familiar about what they have to do, the teacher changes the order in which the students should speak.
- The teacher randomly picks people to continue on the same topic.

This activity will encourage the students to listen actively to what other are saying as they need to be prepared for their turn to speak and they also need to know what the previous speaker is saying so that they can build on the topic.

#### **Empathic**

Empathic listening involves offering sympathy while listening. While being empathetic, a listener understands and not critical about what is said. Empathic listening is an expression of interpersonal affection (Floyd, 3). It improves work and reduces mistakes. Therefore it is an essential factor to build relationships. An empathic listener, listens attentively, observes body language, provides

opportunities for the speaker to share their thoughts and paraphrases what was said by the speaker. It requires an excellent ability to discriminate the emotional signals received.

#### *Approach*

- Focus on the person speaking
- Ask questions to know more
- Acknowledge emotions
- Mental summarising

#### *Activity*

- Pair the students.
- The pairs share an emotional experience from their life with their partners. The experience does not have to be just sad in nature. It could also be the happiest, the most embarrassing or the most frustrating moments experienced by the student in the past. If the students do not want to share their personal experience they can also talk about a social issue which has deeply impacted them. The pairs should stick to the time limit set by the teacher.
- The students are instructed to follow the tips for empathic listening. They listen to their partners and respond empathetically. The teacher walks around the class observing the same.
- When the time is up, student A shares with the class, the experience narrated by student B and vice versa.

Engaging in this activity motivates the learners how to be patient and observant while the other person is speaking about something that has an emotional significance.

**Discriminative Listening** is the simplest form of listening. It is the ability to distinguish the aspects of the message received and the subtleties of

sound, while listening. A listener can make this distinction based on verbal and non-verbal cues. Identifying the differences is essential to make sense of what was expressed. Being good at discriminative listening helps listeners to identify emotional variances while people speak (Changing Minds). Understanding these variances help providing an apt response. It also helps in developing sensitivity to nonverbal interaction.

#### *Approach*

- Blending
- Segmenting
- Identifying verbal and nonverbal cues

#### *Activity*

- Teacher chooses two versions of the same text. The listening texts can be the same story narrated with a few changes, same piece of news with a few differences or a product description with two different versions. The text can be recorded and played, derived from the internet or the teacher can read it out.
- The students listen to the material and identify the differences between the two texts and note it down while listening.
- The activity can be simplified by specifying the number of differences.

The listeners in this activity will learn to listen for something specific. The activity can be tailored to allow the students to identify the differences in the speakers' rate of speech, tone and volume to understand the intentions of the speaker.

#### **Comprehensive Listening**

Comprehensive listening means listening for understanding without being critical. The listener must ensure that the meaning

assigned to the message is the one intended by the speaker and not the meaning assumed by the listener. Comprehensive listening is often essential for the purpose of gaining knowledge. However, it requires the listener to be proficient with the language. This means the learners should be aware of the lexicon and syntax in the listening text. For example, while listening to lectures in a class the learner needs to pay attention in order to gain knowledge. Note-taking while listening enables comprehensive listening. Understanding is not the only purpose of comprehensive listening. The students should also be able to retain what they have listened and understood.

#### *Approach*

- Develop memory skills
- Create internal summaries
- Note taking
- Questioning
- Identifying signal words (Wolvin, 142).

#### *Activity*

- The teacher prepares to speak on a topic that is relevant to the students but at the same time consists of some new information. An informative audio/video can be played if there is a language laboratory or if any other suitable equipment is available.
- The teacher instructs students to note down the key points of the speech while the teacher is speaking.
- The teacher shares ideas on the topic.
- Once the teacher completes speaking, the students discuss their notes in pairs to check the information they might have missed.
- At the completion of pair-work students are asked to share with the

class about what they learnt from the listening text based on their notes.

### **Critical Listening**

Many of the decisions we make on a daily basis depend on our critical analysing either through listening or reading. A Critical listener listens to evaluate and scrutinise the speaker's intention. It involves forming an opinion of what is said and making connections with existing knowledge of the same topic. It sometimes involves problem solving or decision making. Students often require critical listening while participating in a debate, a group discussion or while listening to speeches.

#### *Approach*

- Recognizing persuasive speech
- Determining the speakers' purpose
- Analysing the words and phrases used.
- Evaluating
- Drawing conclusions based on evidence

#### *Activity*

- Teacher selects a video/audio recording of a debate or a speech.
- The students listen the recording and fill the information grid.
- The students distinguish between facts and opinions mentioned by the speaker and note them down in the grid. They also note the evidence to support the facts stated by the speakers.

The teacher has to ensure that the material selected is relevant and appropriate to the students.

### **Appreciative Listening**

Listening to "aural symbols to gain pleasure through their reception" is

appreciative listening (Wolf et, al. 59). Wolvin describes appreciative listening as "listening to gain sensory impression" (143). It includes listening to music or songs, watching movies, documentaries etc. It is listening for the purpose of enjoyment.

#### *Approach*

- Awareness of the style or background of the listening material.

#### *Activity*

- Students watch animated short videos (available on various topics on YouTube) and share with their partners how they felt watching that particular video.

### **Strategies to develop listening skills**

Awareness of strategies to improve listening skills increases students' attention, listening performance and ability to deal with real life listening situations. Rost presents the most common strategies to be implemented while listening based on the work done by other researchers on listening strategies (51). They are:

1. Predicting ideas before listening.
2. Drawing inference from the information available.
3. Self-monitoring one's own performance while listening.
4. Clarifying for better interpretation.
5. Responding to the ideas presented..

### **Structuring the Listening Activities**

The purpose of listening tasks is not just to practice listening but to reach the end goal of developing communication skills. Therefore while designing and planning the tasks, the teacher should aim at ensuring that the students listen to the text and generate the language correctly. The teacher can know whether listening has

happened, when the learners apply what they listened to, in the follow up activities like group discussions and other assignments.

Teachers must exercise caution while designing the tasks. The teacher needs to ensure that the learning input is comprehensible. The purpose of the task should be to provide practice and not test the level of the learners. The tasks need to be structured, as it can make listening text more accessible, motivate students to understand the difference in the various listening types and become aware of how the thinking process vary, based on it (Underwood 21). The following pointers can assist the teacher to design an effective listening class and learner training (Rost 50).

- Prepare the learners for listening: Make the learners aware of what is expected of them while doing the task. Background information of the topic, vocabulary practice, introducing key ideas are ways of activating the listeners' purpose for listening (Rost 50)
- Introduce real life listening as students need to learn how to enhance their listening capabilities in their daily life.
- Shorter listening inputs preferably not longer than two minutes as the students might not be able to recollect all the information if the input is longer.
- Conduct guided activities which enable the learners to follow the text.
- Follow the listening structure:
  - Pre-listening
  - While-listening
  - Post-listening

Field in his book *Listening in the Language Classroom* provides further clarity to the listening structure (286).

<b>Pre-listening</b>	Activating prior knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create motivation</li> <li>• Clarifying vocabulary</li> <li>• Brainstorming ideas about the topic</li> <li>• Using images or videos</li> </ul>
<b>Extensive Listening</b>	General comprehension <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening for gist</li> <li>• Sequencing</li> </ul>
<b>Intensive listening</b>	Text Comprehension <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening for specific details.</li> <li>• Comprehension questions</li> <li>• Gap filling</li> </ul>
<b>Post-listening</b>	Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checking transcript</li> <li>• Highlighting functional language.</li> <li>• Inferring meaning of new words based on context.</li> <li>• Activities to practice the vocabulary and the functional language.</li> </ul>

Table.1 Format of a listening session, adapted from *Listening in the Language Classroom*, Field (286).

Awareness of the different stages of listening enables the teacher to facilitate the students to develop their listening skills and addressing their concerns at every stage.

### **Conclusion**

In-depth research offers different perspectives to teach listening skills. Any of the perspective can be successful when:

- The listening sessions are planned well in advance. This will result in the accelerated progress of learners' confidence and enhancement of listening skills.
- The teacher ensures that listening happens in a purposeful way.
- Students are given opportunities to practice what they have learnt.

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