

LECTURE 4. TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS

When auditing a FL pupils should be very attentive and think hard. They should strain their memory and will power to keep the sequence of sounds they hear and to decode it. Not all the pupils can cope with the difficulties entailed. The teacher should help them by making this work easier and more interesting. This is possible on condition that he will take into consideration the following three main factors which can ensure success in developing listening skills.

1. Linguistic material
2. The content of the material suggested for listening
3. Conditions in which the material is presented.

Listening comprehension can be ensured when the teacher uses the material which has already been assimilated by pupils. However this does not completely eliminate the difficulties in auditing. Three kinds of difficulties should be overcome: phonetic, lexical, and grammatical: *the horse is slipping (sleeping); they worked (walked) till night; phrasal verbs put on, put off, put down; grammatical homonyms Past Indefinite, Past Participle.*

The content of the material also influences comprehension. The topic of communication should be within the ability of the pupils to understand. Difficulties should be explained (proper names, geographical names, terminology etc.) Description is more difficult than narration. The pupils' readiness to listen and comprehend is very important. The title of the story may be helpful in comprehending the main idea of the text. Monologic speech is easier.

Conditions of the presenting are of great importance: the speed of the speech, the number of times of presenting the material. Pupils should be taught to listen to the text once. However they sometimes can grasp only 50% of the information and even less, so a second presentation may be helpful. The presence or the absence of the speaker is also an important factor.

Techniques the teacher uses to develop listening skills.

1. Conducting a lesson in a FL gives the teacher an opportunity to develop pupils' abilities in listening, to demonstrate the language as a means of communication, to provide favorable conditions for the assimilation of the language.
- 2 The teacher uses drill and speech exercises to develop listening comprehension.
- 3 The teacher organizes activities in listening to texts

Guidelines for organizing listening activities

1. Listening texts

Informal talk. Most listening texts should be based on discourse that is either genuine improvised, spontaneous speech, or at least a fair imitation of it. A typical written text that is read aloud as a basis for classroom listening activity is unlikely to incorporate the characteristics of informal speech and will thus provide the learners with no practice in understanding the most common form of spoken discourse.

Speaker visibility; direct speaker-listener interaction. The fact that in most listening situations the speaker is visible and directly interacting with the listener should make us think twice about the conventional use of audio recordings for listening comprehension exercises. It is useful to the learners if you improvise at least some of the listening texts yourself in their presence (or, if feasible, get another competent speaker of the language to do so). Video also makes a positive contribution to the effectiveness of listening practice, in that it supplies the aspect of speaker visibility and the general visual environment of the text.

Single exposure. If real-life discourse is rarely 'replayed' then learners should be encouraged to develop the ability to extract the information they need from a single hearing. The discourse, therefore, must be redundant enough to provide this information more than once within the original text; and where possible hearers should be able to stop the speaker to request a repeat or explanation.

2. Listening tasks

Expectations. Learners should have in advance some idea about the kind of text they are going to hear. Thus the mere instruction 'Listen to the passage ...' is less useful than something like: 'You are going to hear a husband and wife discussing their plans for the summer ...'. The latter instruction activates learners' relevant schemata (their own previous knowledge and concepts of facts, scenes, events, etc.) and enables them to use this previous knowledge to build anticipatory 'scaffolding' that will help them understand.

Purpose. Similarly, a listening purpose should be provided by the definition of a pre-set task, which should involve some kind of clear visible or audible response. Thus, rather than say simply: 'Listen and understand ...' we should give a specific instruction such as: 'Listen and find out where the family are going for their summer holidays. Mark the places on your map.' The definition of a purpose enables the listener to listen selectively for significant information - easier, as well as more natural, than trying to understand everything.

Ongoing listener response. Finally, the task should usually involve intermittent responses during the listening; learners should be encouraged to respond to the information they are looking for as they hear it, not to wait to the end.

Listening to texts

Before pupils are invited to listen to the text the teacher should ensure that all the words and grammar are familiar to the pupils. If there are some important words the teacher introduces them beforehand (the words on the board in the sequence they appear in the text). Then the teacher should direct his pupils' attention to what they are going to listen to. This stimulates their thinking and facilitates their comprehension of the text.

Pre-listening tasks stimulate the pupil's attention:

- Try to grasp the main idea
- Make a plan of the story
- Try to finish the story

Pictures can facilitate comprehension. After they have listened, the teacher may ask questions; make statements on the text for pupils to agree or reject them.

Extensive and intensive listening.

Listening of both kinds is especially important since it provides the perfect opportunity to hear voices other than the teacher's, enables students to acquire good speaking habits as a result of the spoken language they absorb and helps to improve their own pronunciation.

Extensive listening (the teacher encourages students to choose for themselves what they listen to and to do so for pleasure and general language improvement).

Extensive listening will usually take place outside the classroom, material for extensive listening can be found from a number of sources (tapes that accompany different books, songs, video-films).

Intensive listening are taped materials and material on disk. Most coursebooks include tapes and many teachers rely on tapes to provide significant source of language input. The teacher uses taped material at various stages in a sequence of lessons.

Types of listening activities

1. No overt response

The learners do not have to do anything in response to the listening; however, facial expression and body language often show if they are following or not.

Stories. Tell a joke or real-life anecdote, retell a well-known story, read a story from a book; or play a recording of a story. If the story is well-chosen, learners are likely to be motivated to attend and understand in order to enjoy it.

Songs. Sing a song yourself, or play a recording of one. Note, however, that if no response is required learners may simply enjoy the music without understanding the words.

Entertainment: films, theatre, video. As with stories, if the content is really entertaining (interesting, stimulating, humorous, dramatic) learners will be motivated to make the effort to understand without the need for any further task.

2. Short responses

Obeying instructions. Learners perform actions, or draw shapes or pictures, in response to instructions.

Ticking off items. A list, text or picture is provided: listeners mark or tick off words/components as they hear them within a spoken description, story or simple list of items.

True/false. The listening passage consists of a number of statements, some of which are true and some false (possibly based on material the class has just learnt). Learners write ticks or crosses to indicate whether the statements are right or wrong; or make brief responses ('True!' or 'False!' for example); or they may stay silent if the statements are right, say 'No!' if they are wrong.

Detecting mistakes. The teacher tells a story or describes something the class knows, but with a number of deliberate mistakes or inconsistencies. Listeners raise their hands or call out when they hear something wrong.

Cloze. The listening text has occasional brief gaps, represented by silence or some kind of buzz. Learners write down what they think might be the missing word. Note that if the text is recorded, the gaps have to be much more widely spaced than in a reading one; otherwise there is not enough time to listen, understand, think of the answer, and write. If you are speaking the text yourself, then you can more easily adapt the pace of your speech to the speed of learner responses.

Guessing definitions. The teacher provides brief oral definitions of a person, place, thing, action or whatever; learners write down what they think it is.

Skimming and scanning. A not-too-long listening text is given, improvised or recorded; learners are asked to identify some general topic or information (skimming), or certain limited information (scanning) and note the answer(s). Written questions inviting brief answers may be provided in advance; or a grid, with certain entries missing; or a picture or diagram to be altered or completed.

3. Longer responses

Answering questions. One or more questions demanding fairly full responses are given in advance, to which the listening text provides the answer(s). Because of the relative length of the answers demanded, they are most conveniently given in writing.

Note-taking. Learners take brief notes from a short lecture or talk. Paraphrasing and translating. Learners rewrite the listening text in different words: either in the same language (paraphrase) or in another (translation).

Summarizing. Learners write a brief summary of the content of the listening passage. Long gap-filling. A long gap is left, at the beginning, middle or end of a text; learners guess and write down, or say, what they think might be missing.

4. Extended responses

Here, the listening is only a 'jump-off point' for extended reading, writing or speaking; in other words, these are 'combined skills' activities.

Problem-solving. A problem is described orally; learners discuss how to deal with it, and/or write down a suggested solution.

Interpretation. An extract from a piece of dialogue or monologue is provided, with no previous information; the listeners try to guess from the words, kinds of voices, tone and any other evidence what is going on. At a more sophisticated level, a piece of literature that is suitable for reading aloud (some poetry, for example) can be discussed and analyzed.

Teaching speaking a FL is the most difficult part in language learning because pupils need ample practice in speaking to be able to say a few words of their own in connection with a situation. This work is time-consuming.

The stimuli the teacher can use for developing speaking habits are often feeble and artificial. There must be occasions when the pupils feel the necessity to inform someone of something, to explain something and to prove something to someone (situational and communicative approach).

Of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers'

of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing; and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak.

Classroom activities that develop learners' ability to express themselves through speech would therefore seem an important component of a language course. Yet it is difficult to design and administer such activities; more so, in many ways, than to do so for listening, reading or writing. We shall come on to what the problems are presently, but first let us try to define what is meant by 'an effective speaking activity'.

Characteristics of a successful speaking activity

1. *Learners talk a lot.* As much as possible of the period of time allotted to the activity is in fact occupied by learner talk. This may seem obvious, but often most time is taken up with teacher talk or pauses

2. *Participation is even.* Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants all get a chance to speak, and contributions are fairly evenly distributed

3. *Motivation is high.* Learners are eager to speak because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a task objective

4. *Language is of an acceptable level.* Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy

In practice, however, few classroom activities succeed in satisfying all the criteria described above.

Problems with speaking activities

1. *Inhibition.* Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts

2. *Nothing to say.* Even if they are not inhibited, you often hear learners complain that they cannot think of anything to say they have no motive to express themselves beyond the guilty feeling that they should be speaking

3. *Low or uneven participation.* Only one participant can talk at a time if he or she is to be heard, and in a large group this means that each one will have only very little talking time. This problem is compounded by the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all

4. *Mother-tongue use.* In classes where all, or a number of, the learners share the same mother tongue, they may tend to use it because it is easier, because it feels unnatural to speak to one another in a foreign language, and because they feel less 'exposed' if they are speaking their mother tongue. If they are talking in small groups it can be quite difficult to get some classes - particularly the less disciplined or motivated ones - to keep to the target language.

The other factor is the fact that the pupil needs words, phrases, sentence patterns and structures stored up in his memory ready to be used for expressing any thought he wants

to. In teaching speaking the teacher should stimulate his pupils' speech by supplying them with the subject and grammar they need to speak about the suggested topic or situation. The teacher should lead his pupil to unprepared speaking through prepared speaking.

What the teacher can do to help to solve some of the problems

1. Use group work

This increases the sheer amount of learner talk going on in a limited period of time and also lowers the inhibitions of learners who are unwilling to speak in front of the full class. It is true that group work means the teacher cannot supervise all learner speech, so that not all utterances will be correct, and learners may occasionally slip into their native language; nevertheless, even taking into consideration occasional mistakes and mother-tongue use, the amount of time remaining for positive, useful oral practice is still likely to be far more than in the full-class set-up.

Discussion questions

1. What strategies are most effective for developing listening comprehension in foreign language learners?
2. How can teachers help students improve speaking skills while ensuring accuracy and fluency?
3. What approaches can enhance reading skills, including understanding vocabulary, grammar, and context?
4. How can writing activities be designed to strengthen writing skills and encourage creativity in the target language?
5. How can teachers integrate all listening skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) in a balanced and meaningful way during lessons?