

The need of listening comprehension in the teacher

training programme in the faculty of education,
Hodeidah University

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Abstract

Listening has long been the neglected skill in second language acquisition, research, teaching and assessment. However, in recent years there has been an increased focus on L2 listening ability because of its perceived importance in language learning and acquisition. The present study has explored the need of listening comprehension courses in the teacher training programme in the faculty of education in Hodeidah university. After one semester training in listening, the researcher used an IELTS test as an authentic speech to test the level of second year students in the faculty of education. The statistical analysis of the results provided some evidence in support of the need of listening comprehension in the training courses of teachers in the English department of the faculty of education in Hodeidah university.

1. Introduction:

Beginning in the early 70's, work by Asher, Postovsky, Winitz and later, Krashen, brought attention to the role of listening as a tool for understanding and emphasized it as a key factor in facilitating language learning. Thus, listening has emerged as an important component in the process of second language acquisition (Feyten,1991).

Listening comprehension is the most fundamental of the four language skills. Learners can be exposed to a lot of authentic input through listening, and if the input is comprehensible, it would lead to improvement of other areas of language such as pronunciation, speaking and even reading and writing (Anderson and Lynch 1988). It is widely recognized today that listening is an active skill, or rather, a cluster of various sub- skills, which are both learnable and teachable. Listening is regarded as an essential element of foreign language proficiency, and as such plays an important role in foreign language programmes. Various methodologies for the teaching of listening have emerged (such as Anderson & Lynch 1988; Brown, 1991; Ur, 1984). These have had a considerable influence on course design and textbook writing. Although

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listening is very important at the beginner's level, its importance does not diminish as the learners progress to more advanced levels of language proficiency. Practising listening at all stages of learning not only develops this skill but also expands and consolidates other elements of language knowledge, such as vocabulary, grammar and intonation. However, while the importance of listening learning is widely recognized today, there are different views as how to approach the teaching of listening. While some authors, such as Krashen and Terrell (1983), believe in the value of more exposure to spoken language during which learner's unconsciously develop their listening skills and acquire other elements of foreign language, other authors, such as Rost (1990,1994) and Ur (1984), agree that in order for learners to benefit from practicing listening, it is necessary to develop this skill in a direct and systematic way.

However, careful observation of College English teaching practice has found that the teaching of listening skills is still the weak link in the language teaching process. Despite students having mastered the basic elements of English grammar and vocabulary, their listening comprehension is often weak.

In the faculty of education in Hodeidah University students in the English department take courses in reading, writing and spoken, whereas the listening skill is totally neglected. At the same time, students study some courses in linguistics and literature and many of them experience considerable difficulties because the lecturers are foreigners. One may conclude that listening is a crucial skill for successful studies at the English Department, but although students are exposed to listening English through attending lectures and classes, this skill is not developed in a systematic way. This observation was the starting point for the research into the need of listening comprehension in the training programme of the faculty of education in Hodeidah University.

2. Theoretical basis of listening and comprehension:

According to Howatt and Dakin (1974), listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously.

Thomlison's (1984) definition of listening includes "active listening", which goes beyond comprehension as understanding the message content, to comprehension as an act of empathetic understanding of the speaker. Furthermore, Gordon (1984) argues that empathy is essential to listening and contends that it is more than a polite attempt to identify a speaker's perspectives. Rather more importantly, empathetic understanding expands to "egocentric prosocial behavior". Thus, the listener altruistically acknowledges concern for the speaker's welfare and interests.

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Ronald and Roskelly (1985) define listening as an active process requiring the same skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalizing that writing and reading demand; and these authors present specific exercises to make students active listeners who are aware of the "inner voice" one hears when writing.

Language learning depends on listening since it provides the aural input that serves as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication.

Listening is the first language mode that children acquire. It provides the foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and plays a life-long role in the process of communication.

According to Bulletin (1952), listening is the fundamental language skill. It is the medium through which people gain a large portion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and of human affairs, their ideals, sense of values, and their appreciation. In this day of mass communication, much of it oral, it is of vital importance that students are taught to listen effectively and critically. Furthermore it is recognized by Wipf (1984) that listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation and retain and interpret this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance. Rost (2002) defines listening in its broadest sense, as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says (receptive orientation); constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation); negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding (collaborative orientation); and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation). Listening then is a complex, active process of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know.

According to second language acquisition theory, language input is the most essential condition of language acquisition. As an input skill, listening plays a crucial role in students' language development. Krashen (1985) argues that people acquire language by understanding the linguistic information they hear. Thus language acquisition is achieved mainly through receiving understandable input. Given the importance of listening in language learning and teaching, it is essential for language teachers to help students become effective listeners. In the communicative approach to language teaching, this means modeling listening strategies and providing listening practice in authentic situations: precisely those that learners are likely to encounter when they use the language outside the classroom. Besides methodologies for the teaching of listening (Brown,1991; Ur, 1984; Anderson & Lynch,1988; Rost, 1990; Brown &Yule, 1983) point out that listening develops through the process of exposing learners to listening texts on which they perform tasks specially designed to

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promote the development of certain sub-skills. Most authors stress the importance of three main factors in the teaching of listening at all levels: listening materials, listening tasks and the procedure for organizing listening activities. The interplay of these three factors plays a significant role in designing effective listening activities. Therefore, we in Yemen should establish "listening-first" as fundamental in foreign language teaching.

3. Description of the study:

3.1 The Research Question

a. The main concern of the study is: Do our students in the faculty of education need special courses in listening comprehension?

b. The second concern of the study is to introduce a systematic way of teaching listening comprehension courses in the department of English in the faculty of education.

3.2 Subjects

This study was conducted with second year students in the faculty of education. The duration of the study was one semester and the total number of the students who participated in the study was 185 students, divided into two groups.

3.3 Material

During the semester the researcher used a text book "*English Pronunciation in Use*" by Mark Hancock as an introduction to listening comprehension. The aim of choosing is that it gradually moves from the pronunciation of individual sounds towards connected speech and intonation of English in a systematic way. Also it is an authentic exposure of English. The researcher used an audio CD player in teaching the course. Extra listening activities were also practiced in the class taken from "*Prepare for IELTS, General Training Module*" by Penny Cameron & Vanessa Todd. These activities included writing numbers, writing the spelling, listening to conversations, and listening to radio items. The aim of giving these activities was to prepare the students for the assessment test.

4. Instrument:

The assessment of the students' listening skills was carried out using the listening part of IELTS. The test consisted of three sections each of which assessed the ability to comprehend a different type of listening material. The total number of questions was (30). Section one contained (12) items, in this section the students were asked to listen to a short conversation and complete the form. Section two contained (12) items divided into two parts. In the first part the students were asked to listen to a longer conversation and complete the calendar. In the second part the students were asked to circle the correct answer. Section three contained (6) items and in this section the students listened to a short conversation and complete a language school enrolment form. The maximum score was (30) in this part of the IELTS test.

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5. Result and Discussion:

Table (1) shows that the number of students who attended the assessment test which is (185) and their score range is (9-30). The lowest score of the test was (9) and the highest score was (30). The number of students who scored (10) or less was 7 students and the students whose score range was (11-14) were 20 students. The students who scored (15-18) were (84) students, (35) students' score range was (19-22), (26) students' score range was (23-26) and (13) students' score range was (27-30) .

Table 1 shows students' scores

The score	No. of the students	The sum of the scores	The score	No. of the students	The sum of the scores
9	1	9	20	17	340
10	6	60	21	10	210
11	-	-	22	8	176
12	15	180	23	5	115
13	5	65	24	4	96
14	-	-	25	10	250
15	44	660	26	7	182
16	5	80	27	1	27
17	2	34	28	9	252
18	33	594	29	1	29
19	-	-		1	30
The mean is $3389/185 = 18.3$				185	3389

Table (2) shows the grades of the students as adopted by universities in Yemen and the percentage of each category:

No. of the students	The score from-----to	Grade	Percentage
7	0 – 10	Very Poor	4%
20	11 – 14	Poor	11%
84	15 – 18	Pass	46%
35	19 – 22	Good	19%
26	23 – 26	Very Good	13%
13	27 – 30	Excellent	7%
185			100%

The overall scores of the students as illustrated in table (2) can be summarized as follows:

4% of the students scored 10 and below, this indicates very poor performance. 11% of the students scored 11 – 14, 46% scored 15 – 18 , 19% scored 19 – 22, 13% scored 23 – 26 and finally 7% scored 27 – 30. This indicates that most students' scores were below good, therefore there is a severe need for introducing listening comprehension courses in a systematic way in the teacher training programme in the English department in the faculty of education.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations:

The study has explored that the performance of 15% of the students who attended the assessment test is very poor, whereas 7% got excellent grade. 20% of the students got very good and excellent, whereas 80% scored below this grade. 39% of the students got good, very good and excellent grades, but 61% got below these grades.

On the basis of the results obtained we can conclude that there is a severe need for teaching listening comprehension in the faculty of education. So listening practice should be an integral part in the teacher training programme in the faculty of education as our aim is improving Yemeni students' ability as English speakers and teachers.

Although this study was conducted with one type of instrument, i.e. a piece of listening taken from IELTS examination, and the aim was authentic speech, it is hoped that future studies can use other instruments like DVDs and see the effects of different types of speech – the one which stimulates a radio announcement, a television interview, etc. Furthermore, listening comprehension levels do influence the capacity for improvement in other language skills such as speaking, reading, writing and translating. The evidence from this study suggests sound reasons for emphasizing listening comprehension, which highlights the importance of spending much more time doing it. However, improving Yemeni students' ability as English speakers is a demanding process so much research needs to be done in this area.

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