

Identification of Problems Associated with Listening Skill of Bangladeshi Students: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper is an endeavor to focus on some problems of listening skill of learners at tertiary level in private universities in Bangladesh. In communicative language teaching, four language skills are equally important, but in Bangladesh listening is neglected from secondary to tertiary level of education. This essay tries to pinpoint the problems associated with poor listening skill of Bangladeshi students and proposes some practical approaches to solve these problems. Arguably, such an effort may not only help in shedding light on key listening problems but also greatly help in understanding the pedagogical implications of listening for classroom practice, in general, and in the Bangladeshi ELT context, in particular.

Keywords: Listening skill, listening comprehension, social context, receptive skill,, interrelated.

Introduction

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, listening, apart from reading, is generally considered an essential language (receptive) skill for effective oral proficiency. In other words, SLA researchers greatly recognize the important role of listening in terms of ‘vital input’ for language learning as it exposes learners to receive, process and understand linguistic features of second language (L2) spoken discourse (Rost, 1994, p. 141). However, listening as a receptive skill is considered by many researchers (e.g. McDonough & Shaw, 1993, 2003) a demanding and interactive process which poses a great deal of challenges and difficulties to majority of learners. In recent years, mainly because of its complex nature, listening seems to have attracted great attention in terms of both theory and practice which lay greater emphasis as to on how it should be taught in the classroom.

The focus of this article is to study the most common difficulties and problems of listening skill faced by the students of Bangladesh in tertiary level in private universities. Finally, the essay aims to propose some practical approaches that may help L2 students become aware of how and in what way they can listen to English effectively both in and out of the classroom.

Literature Review

In the light of current SLA research, the essay, at first, intends to identify salient issues associated with listening and secondly, it aims to examine potential reasons that mainly generate these problems particularly in Bangladesh.

Issues related to listening skill

Listening, in general, is defined as an ability to identify and grasp pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and meaning of spoken language (Howatt & Dakin, 1974). That is, listening tends to entail two concurrent processes: to listen and understand the spoken discourse at the same time. Besides, Howatt & Dakin and many other researchers (e.g. Ur, 1984; Rost, 1991, 2001; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Hirsch, 1986; Lundsteen, 1979, Underwood, 1989), notably, maintain that listening involves some more component skills such as discrimination between sounds, recognition of grammatical groupings of words and sets of utterances that act to create meaning and development of background knowledge to predict.

People have different reasons for listening, to gain information, to receive instructions, to hear complaints, to enjoy entertainment, and to show respect. Although, it is believed that listening occurs naturally and there is no need to put effort into it, but listening is a challenging skill because it is a learned skill; hard work and efforts are required for effective listening. Listening is a very active process which is a combination of hearing process and background knowledge. Besides, during listening process, meaning is emphasised and not individual words and people have to comprehend immediately, and it happens in the mid of a conversation which requires spoken responses. (Helgesen, 2003)

Given the crucial importance of listening in L2 learning and teaching, the main thrust of SLA research (e.g. Anderson & Lynch, 1988; McDonough & Shaw, 2003; Rost, 2001; Underwood, 1989) seems to suggest that it is essential for teachers to not only understand learners' issues regarding listening but also facilitate them by engaging in a range of task-based activities that may bridge the gap between students' listening in the classroom and different real life situations. In this regard, Rivers' (1981), observation is quite important: 'listening is a critical element in learning any foreign language. It helps the learner to acquire competence in language and he can exhibit his competence if he is communicating at school, at work or in the community' (Rivers' 1981, p. 140 - 149).

Despite the fact that listening skill is generally viewed as a primary vehicle for language learning, it remains one of the least understood skills from pedagogical viewpoint because of its complex nature (Rost, 1980, p. 8; Morley, 1991). In this regard, Anderson (1988, p. 4) rightly states that listening 'under many circumstances is a reciprocal skill' which means that learners need to learn and practice listening in the same way as they rehearse speaking. Apart from Anderson, Brown (1987) notes that a significant number of published courses on listening comprehension as compared to reading, writing and speaking in many EFL countries continue to demonstrate that listening is still regarded as the least important skill in language teaching.

Problems related to listening skill

Given the diversity of problems associated with listening, many students often tend to highlight that listening is their biggest problem. In Bangladesh, most of the private university classes are conducted in English, but learners faces the difficulties to comprehend class lectures because of their poor listening skill. Listening needs considerable training because it is a difficult and challenging communicative skill requiring numerous sub skills and stages. (Alam& Sinha, 2009)

It may be noticed that the basic issue lies in the phenomenon that 'listening, alongside reading', has long been regarded as a passive skill by many L2 learners and teachers like Anderson (1988, p. 6). The possible reason why listening is viewed passive by teachers is that they assume that this skill can greatly

be developed by learners themselves through experience and familiarity with basic rudiments of language such as vocabulary and grammar. Actually the grammar of conversation is totally different from the written register. According to Helgesen (2003), 'Spoken language is very different from written language. It is more redundant, full of false starts, rephrasing, and elaborations. Incomplete sentences, pauses, and overlaps are common.' (Helgesen 2003, p.32)

In real life speech is rapid and fluent which the second language learners find difficult to follow. Thus, they do not comprehend the coherence and get distracted. Rost (1990) says that 'the notion of speed often enters discussions of listening ability, as when second-language learners feel discouraged that they cannot keep up with the normal speed and cannot think fast enough to participate in normal conversation' (Rost 1990, p. 35)

Moreover, there are different ways of pronouncing a word which creates a problem for learners to comprehend. Different speakers pronounce the same words with different accents due to variety of world englishes (Graddol 1997, Crystal 2003). Sometimes the students do not understand the regional speech pattern, unusual pronunciations, dialect or colloquial vocabulary. Hence, negative reaction towards unknown pronunciation, anxiety to rehearse one's own contribution to a conversation and lack of schematic knowledge results lack of motivation in learners (Hedge 2000).

Thus, in the backdrop of above discussion, it may be noted that due to relatively great complexity of listening, most learners in countries like Bangladesh face following problems: English speakers' speed of delivery, their use of connected speech and learners' attempt to understand each and every word, learners' limited vocabulary (i.e., elisions, ellipses, lexical chunks etc), culturally diverse attitude of students to listening, learners' mental blocks or lack of listening stamina and learners' lack of socio-cultural and contextual knowledge of the target language.

The Study Method

This is a descriptive exploratory research based on secondary data. The source of secondary data collection process was publications, research studies and journals.

Findings and Discussions

The review of literature indicated that when teachers are aware of students' learning difficulties they can help them develop effective listening strategies and finally solve their difficulties in listening and improve their listening comprehension abilities.

Bangladeshi language learners have also been encountering above mentioned problems in schools and colleges where listening comprehensions skills are not taught. Arguably, McCarthy and Anderson & Lynch (1983) clearly state the usefulness of two kinds of listening: interactional and transactional which has many pedagogical implications for teaching listening. L2 teachers, for example, need to clearly tell the interactional and transactional uses of listening to students through activities which can enable them to listen for different academic and daily life purposes. For example, these activities may focus on familiarizing students with the knowledge of language system (syntax or grammar, vocabulary and phonology) and the use of the language system (skills of language). Thus, teachers need to instruct learners how they can apply both their knowledge of the language system and skills particularly to understand listening discourse efficiently.

It is argued that teachers need to teach learners how often it is necessary to apply bottom-up and top-down process to decode the message and attribute meaning to it by using the knowledge of social conventions (Richards, 1988, p. 59-60). The reason why these linguistic skills need to be taught is that most students are not well familiar how the meaning of English changes when it is connected together in sentences. Richards (1988, p. 50) also underlines the need of these approaches, ‘an understanding of the role of bottom-up and top-down processes in listening is central to any theory of listening comprehension’.

Another problem which not only Bangladeshi learners but also many other learners all over the EFL countries face is native speakers’ fast speed of delivery. In this regard, Underwood’s (1989, p. 16) observation is quite pertinent as he says that ‘many English language learners believe that greatest difficulty with listening comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks’. What may compound the problem more for these learners is their effort to understand every word they listen.

To address this problem, teachers need to facilitate learners by providing different kinds of tasks based on films, everyday conversations so as to acquaint them with colloquial expressions mostly used in fast natural speech. Berne’s (1998, p. 170), argument largely goes in favour of this approach: ‘L2 listening comprehension should encompass a wide range of situations, different types of listening passages, different modes of presentation (e.g., live, videotape, audiotape), and different types of activities or tasks’. Precisely, Berne underscores the need that teachers should include exercises or tasks which have native speakers’ casual speech in real life situations. In this regard, learners, for instance, can be instructed to listen and draw a picture or diagram according to the information they hear in natural speech contained in tasks.

Closely related to fast speed issue is the problem of distinguishing individual sounds and word patterns in a connected speech. As mentioned above, most Bangladeshi students find difficulties regarding some linguistic features such as elision (omission of a vowel, consonant, or syllable while pronouncing something, sometimes as a natural shortening, as in "he's,") and assimilation (change of a speech sound under the influence of an adjacent sound as “g” to “b” sound in ‘good boy’) in connected speech. The reason might be that these students are not exposed to several forms of elision and assimilation taking place in spoken and written discourse. Helgesen (2003, p. 32) mentioned, ‘Spoken language is very different from written language. It is more redundant, full of false starts, rephrasing, and elaborations, incomplete sentence, pauses, and overlaps are common’.

In order to deal with this problem, L2 teachers can expose learners to variety of spoken English containing the use of elisions and assimilation. An effective approach can be the use of reading and interactive tasks in the classroom which, specifically, enable students to identify how sounds (elisions etc) are strung together in daily life discourse. According to McDonough & Shaw (2003, p. 120), teachers, for instance, can exhibit to students to ‘segment the stream of sound and recognize word boundaries, such as “I like it” which sounds like “I li kit” ‘.

The third reason that may make listening difficult to Bangladeshi learners is their limited exposure to lexical vocabulary used in formal and informal settings. It is because of their lexical deficit, most students are unable to predict or guess about the type of discourse they are going to listen. As McCarthy

(1991) rightly states that based on their real world knowledge listeners, like readers, are constantly engaged in predicting what the message will be.

Above pointed problem tends to underline the need that teachers should enlighten their learners about the use of formal and informal conversations in classroom. In addition, the teachers should facilitate students by providing a range of questions before listening, to make them predict what they are going to listen. Along with the pre-listening questions, teachers can also outline the importance of while-listening and post-listening activities as well. Rost (2001, p. 11), in short, clearly notes that by ‘describing listening activities in term of three phases: pre-, while-, and post-listening activities’ teachers can activate students what they are going to hear just as they are usually prepared in the real life situations. This kind of exercise can also enhance students’ lexical vocabulary, to experience listening effectively out of the classroom.

Fourth problem with Bangladeshi learners have been the examination system in their educational institutions in which listening seems to have no place. In Bangladesh students are always assessed through written text and no listening activities are set in examination process. This particular reason also makes students generally view listening as the least important one. This problem can possibly be solved by giving listening equal place in exams and this change can encourage learners towards paying more attention to develop listening comprehension skills for getting good grades in examinations.

Fifth problem associated with listening is that it sometimes becomes difficult for learners to concentrate L2 discourse due to some individual problems such as mental block or lack of listening stamina. Though students find listening topics quite interesting but they sometimes feel these activities tiring because they require an enormous amount of efforts to follow the meaning. This specific difficulty can be addressed by using tasks which pinpoint the central role of linking devices and discourse markers such as (e.g. “the thing is”, “you may be right but” etc). Moreover, jigsaw listening tasks can also be helpful in listening for communicative purposes and negotiation of meaning.

Sixth most important issue is the lack of meaningful listening practice in the classroom. Instructed practice may make students notice different challenges and needs involved in listening for social and academic purposes. In this regard, extensive listening practice can be made with the help of meaningful tasks. The significance of tasks is comprehensively observed by Ur (1984, p. 25): ‘Listening exercises are most effective if they are constructed around a task. That is to say, the students are required to do something in response to what they hear that will demonstrate their understanding’.

Like Ur(1884), Wood (2002) further explains that task based listening basically involves a number of activities or stages. For example, teacher can ask students to bring camera in the classroom and ask them to follow the instructions of using a camera. In the pre-listening stage, teachers should provide lexical items relevant to the task (use of camera in this case). The teacher can activate students’ interest about task by working on key vocabulary items which may pave the way for prediction (turn on, press, focus etc). Secondly, teachers need to clearly state to learners the demands for completing task (different stages how camera is used). Before playing audio/videotape, teachers should make students understand how to sift important information to complete the task. Thirdly, teachers should give constructive feedback to students’ efforts for doing the task. Lastly, teachers should provide follow up exercises before the task is finished. An example of follow up activities might be a personalized response to the

task, relating the theme of using camera to 'real world' issues (i.e., considering another person's request to make photo).

Similarly different tasks can also be exercised to familiarize students with the importance of intonation (the sound pattern of phrases and sentences produced by rise and fall pitch of the voice). In this regard, a following example may make the point clear: "He can come on Friday" can be contrasted with "He can't come on Friday" (stressed words underlined). For listening exercise, learners can be told how to identify specific information about the attitude of 'real life' speech by noticing stressed words instead of concentrating every word.

Last but not least, students find listening problematic due to their lack of socio-cultural and contextual knowledge of English. Anderson and Lynch (1988) argue that language due to its cultural remoteness can usually impede learners' listening comprehension. That is, listeners find it difficult to comprehend the whole meaning of the listening discourse because of unfamiliarity with the English language used in context. SLA researchers generally argue that in order to enable them to deal with the problem of cultural remoteness and different accents, learners can be exposed to a variety of listening input such as everyday conversation, announcements, turn taking, interviews, TV and radio news (e.g. BBC and CNN), songs and English movies.

Although above mentioned approach sounds very interesting, it may present some problems to Bangladeshi learners. Some students from Religious School called *madrassah*, view English as a colonial legacy, and, therefore, due to some ideological and religious reasons they may react negatively to the idea of learning listening based on movie-oriented tasks and, hence less motivated. Although one may question that this ideology is misplaced one, but it tends to pose practical constraints to teachers in Bangladesh.

The socio-cultural context demands listening materials to be conformed to the cultural and particularly religious sensitivities of its (*madrassah*) students and the institution. In this regard, Richards (2005) holds that motivational listening strategies include generating interest, promoting fun in learning, and providing opportunities for students to speak about themselves. Thus, it is argued that teachers should not only take into account learners' needs but also take care of their socio-cultural sensitivities. Music videos and songs, no matter how helpful they may be, cannot be used at all for task-based listening activities due to this social barrier.

Implications to Research

This review of literature indicated the factors that caused some serious problems for learners' listening comprehension and also offered some useful suggestions for teachers and students to improve their listening comprehension ability. It is hoped that the findings of this study contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning in listening comprehension.

Conclusion

Concluding remarks tend to spell out the point that listening skill is not to be always picked up by the learners themselves. Above discussion indicates that listening should be taught like any other language skills. Moreover, teachers need to be well equipped to not only understand perceptual listening problems of learners but also try to address them in an encouraging manner. Both language teachers and learners need to recognize that listening in terms of understanding and processing spoken discourse is not a

passive act as it was long termed by researchers. Thus, learners need to know how to understand different accents, pronunciation, intonation and semantic implications of what they listen. In this regard, teachers need to be well prepared to strike a balance between approaches and tasks for teaching listening, to ensure that such balanced tasks may meet learners' needs in diverse socio-cultural ELT settings like Bangladesh.

Future Research

I would like to recommend that an in-depth research work should be carried out to unearth the difficulties Bangladeshi students face in listening in English language, and how to encounter these problems both in language classroom in Bangladesh and in designing appropriate curriculum that will adequately tackle this issue.

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