

ASSESSING LISTENING IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstracts:

The importance of listening in language learning can hardly be overestimated. In classrooms, students always do more listening than speaking. Listening competence is universally "larger" than other competence. Listening is not a one-way street. It is not merely the process of a unidirectional receiving of audible symbols one facet – the first step – Of listening comprehension is the psychomotor process of receiving sound waves through the ear and transmitting nerve impulses to the brain. Every classroom lesson involves some form of assessment, whether it is in the form of informal, unplanned, and intuitive teacher processing and feedback, or in formal, prepared, scored tests.

Keywords:

Assessing, Listening, Language classroom

Introduction

One of the main reasons for getting students to listen to spoken English is to let them hear different varieties and accents. In today's world they need to be exposed not only to one variety of English (British English, for example) but also to varieties such as American English, Australian English, Caribbean English, Indian English or West African English.

There are number of ways in which listening activities differ from other classroom exercises: Firstly, Tapes go at the same speed for everybody. Unlike language study or speaking practice or even reading, where individual students can read (to some extent) at their own pace the tape continues even if individual students are lost. Unlike

reading listeners to a tape cannot flick back to a previous paragraph, re – read the headline, stop to look at the picture and think for a bit before continuing. On the contrary, they have to go with the speed of the voice (s). They are listening to. Of course, they can stop tapes and rewind them but essentially, the speed of the speaker (s) dominates the interaction not that of listener.

It is perhaps this relentlessness of taped material which accounts for the feeling of panic which many students experience during listening activities. If they fail to recognize a word or phrase they have not understood. And if, therefore, they stop to think about it, they often miss the next part of the tape and are soon falling behind in terms of comprehension. It is especially for this

reason that students have to be encouraged to listen for general understanding first rather than trying to pick out details immediately. They must get into the habit of letting the whole tape wash over them on first hearing thus achieving general comprehension before returning to listen for specific detail.

Listening is special too because spoken language, especially when it is formal, has a number of unique features including the use of incomplete utterances. Experience of informal spoken English together with an appreciation of other spoken factors, the tone of the voice, the intonation of the speakers use, rhythm, and background noise, will help students to tease meaning out of such speech phenomena¹.

Because it is special characteristics, teachers need to ensure students are well prepared for listening and that they are clearly able to hear what they listen to.

The Principles Behind Teaching Listening

However good our tape is, it will be useless if the tape recorder has a poor speaker or if the motor speed keeps changing and the tape goes faster or slower. That is the first principle. We need to be sure that the tape recorder is just as important as the tape.

Second principle, preparation is vital. Teacher and students need to be prepared for listening. Teacher need to listen to the tape all the way through before they take it into class. That way, they will be prepared for any problems, noises, accents etc, that come up. Students need to be made ready to listen. This means that they will need to look at pictures, discuss the topic, or read the questions first.

Third principle once will not be enough. There are almost no occasions when the teacher will play a tape only once students will want to hear it again to pick up the things they missed the first time. The first listening is often used just to give students an idea of what the listening material sounds like. So that subsequent listening is easier for students. Once students have listened to a tape two or three times, however, they will probably not want to hear it too many times more.

Next principle, students should be encouraged to respond to the content of listening, not just to the language. As with reading, the most important part of listening practice is to draw out the meaning, what is intended, what impression it makes on the students. Questions like "Do you agree?" are just important as question like "what language did she use to invite him?"²

¹Harmer, Jeremy. *How to teach English*. 1st published (Addison Wesley Longman Limited 1998), p. 99.

²Underwood .M, *Teaching Listening Skills*, (Longman 1989,ur.P.A Course in Language Teaching, Cambridge University Press 1996), p. 63.

Fifth principle, different listening stages demand different listening tasks. Because there are different things we want to do with a listening text we need to set different tasks for different listening stages. The last principles, good teachers exploit listening texts to the full. If teacher ask students to invest time and emotional energy in a listening task, and if they themselves have spent time choosing and preparing the listening, then it makes sense to use the tape for as many different applications as possible. After an initial play of a tape, teacher can play it again for various kinds of study before using the subject matter, situation or tape script for a new activity.³

Microskills and Macroskills of Listening

Based on seminar article on teaching listening skills, Jack Richards (1983)⁴ provided a comprehensive taxonomy of aural skills, which he called microskills, involved in conversational discourse level. The former pertain to skills at the sentence level. Adapted from Richards and other sources, the list can help us to break down just what is that your learners need to actually perform as the acquire effective listening strategies. Through a checklist of micro and macro skills, we can get a good idea of what our techniques need to cover in

the domain of listening comprehension. And in evaluation of listening, these micro and macro skills can become testing criteria.

Microskills

1. Retain chunks of language of different lengths in short-term memory.
2. Discriminate among the distinctive sounds of English.
3. Recognize English stress patterns, words in stressed and unstressed positions, rhythmic structure, international contours, and their role in signaling information.
4. Recognize reduced forms of words.
5. Distinguish word boundaries, recognize a core of words, and interpret word order patterns and their significance.
6. Process speech at different rates of delivery.
7. Process speech containing pauses, errors, corrections, and other performance variables.
8. Recognize grammatical word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), system (e.g., tense, agreement, pluralization), patterns, rules, and elliptical forms.
9. Detect sentence constituents and distinguish between major and minor constituents.
10. Recognize that a particular meaning may be expressed in different grammatical forms.

³ Underwood .M, Effective Classroom Management (Longman, 1987), p. 82.

⁴ Richards, J. Listening Comprehension: Approach, design, procedure. (TESOL Quarterly, 17. p. 220-221)

Macroskills

11. Recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse.
12. Recognize the communicative functions of utterances, according to situations, participants, goals.
13. Infer situations, participants, goals using real-world knowledge.
14. From events, ideas, etc., described, predicts outcomes, infer links and connections between events, reduce causes and effects, and detect such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, give information, generalization, and exemplification.
15. Distinguish between literal and implied meanings.
16. Use facial, kinesic, body language, and other nonverbal clues to decipher meanings.
17. Develop and use a battery of listening strategies, such as detecting key words, guessing the meaning of word from context, appealing for help, and signaling comprehension or lack thereof.

It is important to note that these 17 skills apply to conversational discourse. Less interactive forms of discourse, such as listening to monologues like academic lectures, include further, more specific micro and macro skills⁵. Students in academic setting need to be able to perform such things as identifying the structure of a

lecture, detecting the possible biases of the speaker, critically evaluating the speaker's assertions and developing means (through note taking, for example) of retaining the content of a lecture.

Understanding the Terms "Assessment" and "Test"

Before specifically considering the topic of assessing listening in particular, a word is in order about two commonly used terms. It is tempting at times to simply think that assessment and test are synonymous, appearing in free variation depending on the whim of the speaker or writer.

A glance at some teacher reference books of 10 or more years ago could bear out such an assumption. However, in recent years, the profession seems to have come to an appropriate consensus that the two terms are, in fact, not synonymous.⁶

Tests are a subset of assessment. Assessment is an ongoing pedagogical process that includes a number of evaluative acts on the part of the teacher.⁷ When a student responds to a question, offers a comment, or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an evaluating of the student's performance. A student's written work, from notes or short answers to essays, is judged by the

⁵Blackwell, A & Naber T. *Academic Listening and Speaking*. (New York: Oxford University Press. 2006)

⁶Douglas, Brown. *Teaching by Principles* (San Francisco State University: Third Edition 2007), p. 317.

⁷Ibid.

teacher in reading and listening activities, student's responses are implicitly evaluated. All that is assessment. Technically it is referred to as informal assessment, because it is usually unplanned and spontaneous and without specific scoring or grading formats, as opposed to formal assessment, which is more deliberate and usually has conventionalized feedback. Tests fall into the latter category. They are planned sets of tasks or exercises, with designated time frames, often announced in advance, prepared for (and sometime feared) by students, and characteristically offering specific scoring or grading formats.

In considering classroom assessment, then, be prepared to entertain a range of possible pedagogical procedures. One of the first observations that needs to be made in considering assessment is that listening is unobservable. We cannot directly see or measure or otherwise observe either the process or the product of aural comprehension.

Assessing Types of Listening and Micro and Macroskills

We have considered the micro and macro skills of listening, from processing tiny bits and pieces of language to strategic, interactive and complex skills of extended discourse. These two related taxonomies are indispensable to valid, reliable assessment of student's listening comprehension ability. The more closely

we can pinpoint exactly what we want to assess, the more reliably will we draw our conclusions.

What assessment method (tasks, item formats) are commonly used at the various level? Consider the following list of sample tasks:

- 1. Intensive listening tasks
 - Distinguishing phonemic pairs
Ex. Grass – glass; leave – live
 - Distinguishing morphological pairs
Ex. Miss – missed;
 - Distinguishing stress patterns
Ex. I can go; I can't go
 - Paraphrase recognition
Ex. I come from Taiwan; I'm Taiwanese
 - Repetition (s repeat a word)
- 2. Responsive listening tasks
 - Question
Ex. What time is it? – Multiple choice responses
 - Question
Ex. What time is it? – open ended response
 - Simple discourse sequences
Ex. Hello, nice weather. Tough test
- 3. Selective listening tasks
 - Listening cloze
(students fill in the blanks)
 - Verbal information transfer
(students give MC verbal response)
 - Picture cued information transfer
(students choose a picture)
 - Chart completion
(students fill in a grid)

- Sentence repetition
(students repeat stimulus sentence)
- 4. Extensive listening tasks
 - Dictation
(students listen (usually 3 times) and write a paragraph)
 - Dialogue
(students hear dialogue – MC comprehension questions)
 - Dialogue
(students hear dialogue – open – ended response)
 - Lecture
(students take notes, summarize, list main points, etc)
 - Interpretive tasks
(students hear a poem – interpret meaning)
 - Stories, narrative
(students retell a story)

Testing, Assessing, and Teaching

The word assessment becomes a popular word for educators, in much the same way that communicative or interactive have gained widespread acceptance in language teaching circles. A test is a method of measuring a person's ability or knowledge in a given domain, with an emphasis is on the concepts of method and measuring. Tests are instruments that are (usually) carefully designed and that have identifiable scoring rubrics. Test are prepared administrative procedures that occupy identifiable time periods in a curriculum when learners master all their faculties to offer peak performance,

knowing that their responses are being measured and evaluated.

Assessment, on the other hand, is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain. Whenever a student responds to a question, offer a comment, or tries out a new word or structure the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment of the student's performance. Listening activities usually require some sort some productive performance that the teacher implicitly judges, however peripheral that judgment may be. A good teacher never ceases to assess students whether those assessments are incidental or intentional.⁸

In this view of those two concepts, tests are subsets of assessment, they are certainly not the only form of assessment that a teacher can make. Tests can be useful devices, but they are only one among many procedures and tasks that teachers can ultimately use to assess students.

What we are doing when we are "coaching" our students and giving them feedback is essentially informal assessment: incidental, unplanned comments and responses like "Good job!" "Did you say can or can't?" you go to the movies yesterday?" or a marginal comment on a paper. A good deal of teacher's informal assessment is commended in classroom tasks designed to elicit performance but not

⁸Brown, H. Douglas. *Teaching by Principles* (Longman, San Francisco State University. 2007) p.445.

with the intent of recording results and making fixed judgments about student's competence.

On the other hand, formal assessment includes exercise or procedures specifically designed to tap into a storehouse of skills and knowledge. They are systematic, planned sampling techniques constructed to give teacher and student an appraisal of student achievement.

Maybe we have a question, is formal assessment the same as a test? We can say that all tests are formal assessments, but not all formal assessment is testing. For example, we might use a student's journal or portfolio of materials as a formal assessment of the attainment of certain course objectives, but it is problematic to call those two procedures "tests". A systematic set of observations of student's frequency of oral participation in class is certainly a formal assessment, but it too hardly what anyone would call a test.⁹

Principles of Language Assessment

Whether we are focusing on testing or assessing, a finite number of principles can be named that serve as guidelines for the design of a new test or assessment and for evaluating the efficacy of an existing procedure.¹⁰

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Brown, H. Douglas. *Language Assessment: Principles and classroom practices* (New York: Person Education 2004) p. 42.

A. Practicality

A good test is practical. It is within the means of financial limitation, time constraints, ease of administration, and scoring and interpretation.

B. Reliability

A reliable test is consistent and dependable. A number of source of unreliability may be identified:

- The test itself (it is construction), known as test reliability
- The administration of a test
- The test taker, known as student – related reliability
- The scoring of the test, known as rater (or scorer) reliability

C. Validity

By far the most complex criteria of a good test is validity, the degree to which the test actually measure what it is intended to measure. How does one establish the validity of a test? Statistical correlation with other related measures is a standard method. But ultimately, validity can be established only by observation and theoretical justification.

D. Authenticity

In a test, authenticity may be present in the following ways:

- The language in the test is a natural as possible
- Items are contextualized rather than isolated

- Topics and situations are interesting, enjoyable and humorous
- Some thematic organization to items is provided, such as through a story line or episode
- Tasks represent or closely approximate, real world tasks

E. Wash back

When students take a test, ideally they will receive information (feedback) about their competence, based on their performance. That feedback should “wash back” to them in the form of useful diagnoses of strengths and weakness. Wash back also includes the effects of an assessment on teaching and learning prior to the assessment itself, that is, on preparation for the assessment. Informal assessment is by nature more likely to have built – in wash back effects, because the teacher is usually providing interactive feedback. Formal tests can also have positive wash back, but they are also subject to an inadvertent absence of wash back if students simply receive a letter grade or a single overall numerical score.

Conclusion

Assessment is an integral aspect of the pedagogical process of designing lessons, implementing them, and evaluating their success. Without an

assessment component in every listening activities and every course, we could’nt determine the attainment of objectives and goals.

To assessing listening we have to considered to what levels and what assessment methods appropriate to our students. We have also consider too the micro and macroskills of listening, from processing tiny bits and pieces of language to strategic, interactive, and complex skills of extended discourse.

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