Challenges Affecting Listening Comprehension in Professionally-Oriented English and the Strategies for Improvement (Railway Engineering)

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Abstract

The paper touches upon peculiarities of the formation and improvement of listening skills at professionally-oriented ESL classes at a non-linguistic university. This paper includes a definition of listening as a lingua-psychological and educational phenomenon. The frequent linguistic, cognitive, and communicative challenges faced by ESL learners, such as the form of presentation of the audio, contact and distant types of listening, specific terminology and grammar, lack of paralinguistic information, multi-level classes, etc. are researched. This paper emphasizes the importance of developing listening comprehension skills that are essential for preparing a highly qualified expert in the professional field of transport logistics and economics who is competent enough to function effectively and deal with cross-cultural issues.

Keywords

Listening · Listening comprehension · Professionally-oriented foreign language · Psychological cognitive process · Listening strategies

JEL Codes

Y80 · Z10

1 Introduction

There is no doubt that listening plays an essential role in language acquisition. According to N. Chomsky, it is one of the four major skills necessary to obtain linguistic competence (Chomsky, 1993). It is equally indispensable for acquiring communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). Language as a system, in the simplest way, is understood as "the native speakers' ability to formulate 'well-formed sentences'" (Thornbury, 2006, p. 37). The actual use of language is understood as "a complex range of linguistic abilities underlying the capacity to communicate successfully, not autonomous but intertwined with other cognitive (and maybe also motivational and emotional) processes, and being integrated with other means of communication" (Vorwerg, 2015, pp. 140–141). In real communication, the share of speech perception by ear begins from 15% and depends on individual peculiarities whether a person is an auditory learner or not (Basova, 2000, p. 101). During ESL listening-comprehension classes, it is almost impossible to develop only the auditory skill one-sidedly. Working with audio texts, one simultaneously practices lexical, grammatical, and phonetic skills. Audio texts provide valuable information for discussion, which, in turn, presupposes further development of speech proficiency and writing abilities. Learners traditionally view listening comprehension as a demanding and complicated process.

A survey conducted among students in the master's degree program at USURT has shown that 71% of the respondents pointed out that listening presents more difficulty than speaking, reading, or writing. Moreover, 43% said that they are sometimes unable to get the meaning of a spoken word while immediately recognizing it in the written form. More than half of the students stressed that it is challenging for them to include the material acquired through listening comprehension in further professional communication.

It reveals barriers of listening comprehension experienced by students specializing in transport logistics and economics during the classes of professionally oriented English language. Moreover, the paper aims to offer some suggestions for overcoming these difficulties through effective techniques. First, it is essential to give a general definition of abilities and skills forming the basis of effective listening

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comprehension. Second, the main modes of auditory perception of educational information are described. Next, the research dwells upon the constituent parts of the listening comprehension process.

2   Materials and Methods

It may safely be said that the efficiency of language learning depends on how much students read and listen to the foreign language. As the most commonly used language skill, listening influences language development more than the other three English skills.

As a psychological phenomenon, listening occurs in three cognitive psychological processes: input processing, system change, and output processing. The first part of listening and speech perception activities is selective attention. In this process, metacognitive psychology's ability to regulate cognitive behavior can enhance students' concentration. After the speech input condition is recognized, a condition for attention and comprehension arises, and thus the speech is stored in the student's working memory (short-term memory). The second part of the psychological process of listening comprehension is memory. The third part includes absorption and reconstruction. In accordance with the psychological cognition model, the student decodes, reconstructs, absorbs, and understands the listening task. It is the active cognitive process of listening to students where metacognitive psychology has a positive adjustment effect on the enthusiasm and interest of listening students. The last part is automated processing. It is the use of listening skills that enables students to spend less time and occupy less working memory to assimilate familiar listening content. Consequently, long-term listening practice and cognitive activities can improve listening psychology processing ability (Chen, 2020).

Inferencing is considered to be the key process here. For example, when listening to the phrase "the economic impact of the coronavirus," students will activate facts about the pandemic and pay special attention to how COVID-19 has led to the dampening of economic activity, unemployment, and reducing the labor force worldwide. The main task of students is to understand the general idea of the listening selection without focusing on specifics (words, grammatical structures, etc.) (Newton & Nation, 2021). The listeners have to concentrate on specific details, individual words and phrases, and unfamiliar vocabulary or structures, which is vital to understanding the entire meaning of the conversation or other types of listening.

The success of the listening comprehension process depends not on a single "top-down" or "bottom-up" process but on the ability to combine these two modes to become more efficient listeners (Douglas Brown, 2004).

To provide efficient listening for students:

1. Pre-listening background-based knowledge, and make the students aware of what they will listen to. These activities include the following types of tasks: setting the context, arousing interest, activating current knowledge, activating vocabulary or language, predicting content, and checking or understanding listening tasks. For example, it is possible to introduce the title of the text and suggest posing questions to make assumptions about its content. A group discussion based on questions prepared in advance may also prove quite practical.
2. While-listening activities concentrate on the main listening. The most common activities are completing dialogues or texts, filling in gaps, matching, finding mistakes, and searching for information. They mostly involve questions and answers, choosing a true-false statement, ticking items, summarizing, and discussing the text (Cotton et al., 2011).

3   Results and Discussion

Although the problem of teaching listening skills to ESL students has received profound consideration in the methodical and pedagogical literature, this paper discovers that many students still have much difficulty in mastering spoken speech comprehension. The difficulties arise primarily due to the conditions of perception, such as one-time and short-term presentation of the material. Scientists distinguish communicative listening, the purpose of which is to understand foreign oral speech presented just once (Azimov & Shchukin, 2009, p. 101). The speaker's tempo of speech also refers to perceptive difficulties. For example, the average tempo of a native Russian speaker is 240–260 syllables per minute, which, on the whole, coincides with the average rate of English speech (250 syllables per minute) (Azimov & Shchukin, 2009, p. 305). Troubles begin when the mechanism of internal pronunciation lags behind the speed of information presented or when it is much faster. In the first case, students tend to lose the thread of what they hear. In the second case, the attention of students weakens. In both cases, it is challenging to put the constituent parts of the utterance together. It is considered optimal for listeners when the tempo of educational material corresponds to the tempo of their native speech. It is possible to overcome this problem by increasing the length of pauses between the semantic parts of the text. There are also difficulties associated with the form of presentation of the audio text. Almost a third of students in the master's degree program at the USURT pointed out that monologues are easier to understand compared to dialogues and group discussions; among monologues, story-based texts are more understandable than descriptions. In general, high

tones, such as children's or women's voices, are perceived worse than low tones.

The next problem results from the source of listening. Researchers distinguish between contact and distant listening (Galskova & Gez, 2009, p. 161). Contact listening is an integral part of interactive communication. In turn, distant listening implies the indirect perception of information (e.g., through television, audio recording, multimedia broadcasting on the Internet, etc.). This type of communication is an independent form of social interaction with its own characteristics and challenges. Due to the objective reasons (one of them being distance learning introduced in many educational institutions due to the global COVID-19 pandemic), distant listening became the main type of listening comprehension in ESL classes at a non-linguistic university. Audio recordings and podcasts (episodic series of digital downloadable audio files) provide a convenient way to present language material in professionally-oriented ESL classes (Schuller et al., 2013).

In this case, it is possible to present a photograph or a series of photos explaining the situation in more detail. The task may be to arrange pictures in the correct order either according to the listened text or as a pre-listening task aimed to predict the topic. Another way out may be to look for a video fragment dealing with the same situation and demonstrate it before the audio. Moreover, the current development of new information technologies has dramatically reduced the need for listening comprehension without visual support. Thus, for example, there are various types of video calls and conferencing instead of telephone conversations. For example, in the process of studying logistics services, one can show a short video clip "A vision on the future of European logistics", "a Brussels-based trade association that represents nine members which are all related to the logistics sector, either as users, providers, or customers" (The Alliance for European Logistics, 2011). The tasks can include filling in the gaps with a suitable term: "A quick check online confirmed that the box was with a ___ (courier). E-customs and single ___ (transport documents) will have an increased supply chain security and efficiency. E-commerce opens the door to _ (trade)." It has also proved effective after the sufficient introduction of all terms to turn off the sound and ask students to "voice" the video sequence using their notes. A person remembers "15% of the information that he or she receives through speech and 25% in visual form; if both of these methods of transmitting information are used simultaneously, a person can perceive up to 65% of the content of this information" (Tovazhnyansky et al., 2005).

However, several techniques may be suggested to manage a classroom to teach students with varying levels of listening comprehension productively. For example, it is possible to offer multi-level tasks that vary from the easiest ones up to the most thought-provoking. After listening to a fragment on the topic "Introduction to Logistics," students with basic knowledge may be offered to fulfill a traditional multiple-choice test with questions on a general understanding of the contents. In turn, students with better knowledge can be offered to choose from a list of quotes the one that illustrates the idea of the fragment and provide the reasons for such choice:

- "The line between disorder and order lies in logistics . . .";
- "My logisticians are a humorless lot . . . they know if my campaign fails, they are the first ones I will slay.";
- "Creativity is an import-export business." (Vaschenko & Kholmanskikh, 2020).

It has also proved rather effective to offer students with basic knowledge a printed text based on listening comprehension without initial syllables of the keywords. The task is to insert these syllables and, in the end, to use the keywords to convey the content of the text. It is important to explain to the students that keywords mainly occur at the beginning of the text, can be repeated several times, and stand out in voice and intonation.

The English language began to develop according to the "law of economy of speech means," many forms of regional dialects are being unified; lexical phenomena are reduced, grammatical forms are simplified, pronunciation becomes easier, and phonetic increases variability (Osipyan et al., 2021). Another difficulty arises because globalization and freedom of movement oblige a qualified professional to deal with different accents and peculiarities of vocabulary. Traditionally, schools and universities prefer teaching mainly British English, but it is more challenging to perceive regional and dialectal pronunciation. These features may be crucial in formal and non-formal communication. For example, a teacher can use the educational and methodological complex Oxford English for Logistics and open Internet sources (Grussendorf, 2013).

It is advisable to draw their attention to understanding the intentions of the communicants, their social status, and presuppositions for the dialogue and its context. Thus, learners can understand the ways of expressing different intentions and develop models of their generation.

Another stumbling block to mastering listening comprehension skills is the students' wish to understand every word while the main idea remains vague and unclear. A survey conducted among students in the master's degree program at the USURT has proved that 86% of respondents do not always perceive clear boundaries between words. They also tend to catch the sense of separate fragments while losing the idea of the whole text. Learners either try to recall the meaning of a word or remember the previous one, which can seem particularly challenging because professionally-oriented classes are centered around specific terminology. It may seem

mistakenly familiar but acquires a different sense in the given professional field: a duty, third-party logistics, a cherry picker, lead time, a blanket order, etc. The presence of homonyms in the perceived information falls under the same category (words belonging to the same part of speech and sounding the same but different in meaning). For example, in transport logistics, students sometimes mix up the following words: a ship (a large boat)—to ship (to send something far away); customs (the place at the border where travelers' bags are examined)—customs (the plural of traditions), etc. The use of lexical units in a figurative sense also hinders understanding: to keep an eye on the budget, tailored logistic solutions, etc. Linguistic difficulties distract the listener from the content, making it difficult to understand the general idea.

It is also possible to actualize the terms before the listening procedure in the form of a discussion on the topic or a dictation. Another possible recommendation to overcome the difficulty connected with vocabulary usage is to limit the translation into the native language. Many participants in the educational process consider it the easiest way to acquire language skills, but if students have to constantly resort to translation, they tend to lose confidence when coming across an unfamiliar word.

There are cases when finding an equivalent from the first language is the only method to memorize the term. However, it is better to provide the context that illustrates the meaning of the vocabulary unit, show students pictures, or suggest English synonyms, antonyms, or definitions (e.g., matching exercises). For example, while studying the topic "Shipping goods," it would seem more efficient to show conventional symbols of international standards of marking products instead of translating word combinations or show a layout of a typical storeroom while studying warehousing operations and suggest students to label all warehouse areas.

One of the most productive techniques is the Hot Seat game. It is designed to activate vocabulary and improve listening skills and unprepared speaking skills. The group of students is divided into subgroups (preferably two; the number of subgroups can be increased if the group is large). Both subgroups of students sit facing the board. The instructor puts two empty hot chairs in front of the teams—one for each. A member from each team will then sit on the appropriate chair facing his or her teammates, with his or her back to the board. The teacher prepares in advance a list of vocabulary units that are actualized in this lesson, which he or she sequentially writes on the board. The goal of the method is for the members of the subgroup to describe this word using synonyms, antonyms, definitions, etc. The student on the hot chair listens to teammates and tries to guess the lexical unit written by the teacher on the blackboard. The first student to pronounce the hidden word wins a point for the team. The students take turns sitting on the hot chair, so each of them is involved in both roles.

4 Conclusion

It may be safely said that the efficiency of language learning depends on how much students read and listen to the foreign language. Being the most commonly used language skill, listening has a more significant influence on the development of language than the other three English skills.

This paper demonstrates that listening comprehension is a complicated process. There is no universally valid method to cope with all the above challenges. Teachers are supposed to teach students appropriate listening strategies. Listening activities should be organized from basic to advanced levels as students master English. Listening skills are essential for learning a foreign language because listening is a basic language skill. Strategic knowledge can assist students in solving listening problems.

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