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POOR LISTENING SKILLS: A BARRIER TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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Summary. *Listening skills play an important role not only in our daily life, but also in our professional life. In fact, this skill is considered to be the greatest challenge to be developed because when talking to a new audience, we are trying to attract people's attention by making use of different strategies. We want them to listen to us, not just hear. By honing our listening ability, we are improving our relationship with the audience, we may gain more control on our needs and interests. This paper explores the significance of listening skills in building up closer relationships with our peers, and in broadening our level of academic knowledge. Studying a new language means that we are exposed to new sounds, new vocabulary that is quite difficult to understand if you do not interact with people who speak the target language. As 14th Dalai Lama said, "When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new."*

Keywords: *listening skills, listening difficulties/barriers, communicative competence, modes of listening.*

NIVELUL SCĂZUT AL ABILITĂȚILOR AUDITIVE: BARIERĂ PENTRU O COMUNICARE EFICIENTĂ

Rezumat. *Abilitățile auditive dețin un rol important nu doar în viața de zi cu zi, ci și în activitatea noastră profesională. De fapt, aceasta reprezintă o provocare pentru vorbitorul care încearcă să atragă atenția unui auditoriu utilizând diferite strategii, ca acesta prin urmare să fie ascultat, și nu doar auzit. În acest articol vom încerca să demonstrăm cât de importantă poate fi dezvoltarea acestei abilități în vederea îmbunătățirii relațiilor interpersonale, în relațiile profesionale și totodată în dezvoltarea cunoștințelor noastre academice. Studiind o limbă străină, noi suntem expuși mai întâi de toate unor sunete și unui vocabular nou greu de deslușit la prima vedere, însă fiind ghidați de mentori și urmând sfaturile acestora, imposibilul devine posibil.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *abilități auditive, bariere auditive, competența comunicativă, modalități de ascultare.*

Every single day we talk to people and receive different information from different audience, either by reading it or listening to someone or something. When speaking about the acquisition of a new language, listening is that skill which requires the most of our attention; without it we can do nothing. In language teaching, communication is divided into four major skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening and reading represent receptive skills, while speaking and writing are known as productive skills; there is a natural relationship between these skills [9, p. 27]. Everyone wants to speak the language they are interested in, but we can achieve this only by listening to our target lan-

guage in a proper environment, attentively, and effectively.

The entry of the United States into the World War II had a significant role in language teaching with the appearance of the Army Specialised Training Program (ASTP), 1942. The objective of that army programs was for learners to be able to communicate in a variety of foreign languages. Because there were no textbooks, L. Bloomfield and his colleagues used the technique "**the informant method**". Thus, a native speaker who was called "the informant" used to provide sentences for imitation, and a linguist was there to supervise the learning process. That was the only way they learnt a language: by listening to

that informant, without paying attention to grammar rules. That method was the starting point for linguists to put more emphasis on oral-based approach to learn a foreign language. The language was taught only by drawing attention to pronunciation and oral drilling and by the end of 1950s, the **Audiolingual Method** made its appearance [6, p. 44-47]. Nowadays we are trying to do the same: to make our students understand the importance of a good pronunciation by listening to our teachers, or even better, to authentic material from our daily life. With J. Asher's work on Total Physical Response in the late 1970s, listening, as a key element of language learning and teaching, became known to everyone. Because we know the difference between "listen to something, and hear something", we can claim that listening can be difficult even in our first language. Namely this skill demands the perfect coordination between our ears and our brain in order to be able to decode the speaker's message. That is why we need regular practice and consistent efforts to improve our listening skills. By engaging our students in active listening, we allow them to practice the English language (our target language) and to remember the new information for a later use. Step by step, they can get familiar with new sounds and vocabulary of the target language and develop the skills they need in order to speak and interact with people. A. Vizental points out that when teaching receptive skills, we must consider some basic characteristics of real-life listening because when we listen to someone, we are looking for getting the idea of the message, we are not trying to translate our interlocutor's individual words [9, p.139]:

- listening is not a manipulation of vocabulary and grammar, but a process of extracting meaning;
- the receiver is not a passive recipient of the message, but actively interacts with the person she/he is listening to and contributes meaning to it;
- receptive skills do not work alone, but together with productive ones.

Achieving a reasonable level of comprehension and automatically processing auditory data are both components of listening fluency. This calls for consistent practice and prolonged exposure to spoken language. We absorb linguistic information through reception; without it, we would be unable to produce language. Through speaking and listening activities that demand active listening, teachers assist students in practising the English language more successfully and in remembering the material for future use. In order to give students the most engaging activities, teachers must recognize the distinct functional roles that speaking and listening

play in everyday language. Listening is the skill that helps our learning and this ability increases knowledge and broadens opportunities. If we accept the person we are talking to and if we are aware of the meaning of the other person's words, who shares the same ideas, thoughts, feelings, we are very likely to understand them. Having a positive attitude towards the person we are listening to, make us take the most of these advantages [7, p.176-179]:

- listening skills help us build effective relationships;
- good listening prevents miscommunication;
- it facilitates solving problems we may have at workplace;
- effective listening helps in sharing ideas and experiences;
- good listening improves decision-making and critical thinking.

Scholars from University of Maryland, Baltimore County, say that students can be engaged in listening activities in three different ways, depending on the planned activities:

Bidirectional mode: Exchanges of information include two or more people.

- Have students engage in discussions where each student has to ask at least one question during the time limit.
- Have students engage in Skype conversations with students in a class in a different country.
- Instruct students to interview people in their community about the class topic.
- Assign a presentation where learners have to interact with audience members throughout the presentation.
- Read a question of the day and allow students to share their answers. Have students ask each other follow-up questions about their answers.
- Have students engage in a Scavenger Hunt where they "Find someone who" has a certain quality in the classroom.

Unidirectional mode: Input comes from other sources and is taken in by the listener

- Have students listen to a podcast and answer comprehension questions about it.
- Play a song or movie clip and have students fill-in-the-blanks with the missing words that they heard.
- Create a study guide for your lecture and have students fill in the notes (including titles, key words, dates, names, etc.) by listening.
- Instruct students to listen to a news show and identify various parts of spoken language including fillers, intonation, stress, etc.
- Give students a category (birthdays, height,

shoe size, etc.). Students listen and arrange themselves from highest to lowest by listening to their classmate's answers.

Autodirectional mode: Our internal self-dialogue and self-talk where the listener listens to his or her own thoughts.

- Have students sit in silence for a period of time. After they write down all of their self-talk thoughts, they may keep a self-talk journal.
- Play four corners: assign each corner of the room as an answer to a question. Have students move to different corners based on their answers to the question.
- Have students brainstorm a topic by making a mind map individually.
- Instruct students to think about a topic for one minute. Students can draw out their thinking on a poster [1, Apud p.72].

However, as S.Kumar and P. Lata (2015) argue if we want to be successful in what we do, we need, first of all, to identify the main features of a *poor listener* and a *good listener* because this will help us focus on the points to be improved when talking to them:

a) *a poor listener*: either will try to blame the speaker or will consider the subject to be dry; will get distracted easily, failing to focus on the speaker and the message being conveyed; will find it difficult to listen to complex material, will interrupt the speaker, which can disrupt the flow of conversation and prevent them from fully understanding the message; will have the tendency to read light and recreational materials; will resist new ideas; will pay much attention to appearance and delivery, providing little to no feedback, such as nodding, making eye contact, or verbal affirmations, which can signal to the speaker that they are not engaged.

b) *an effective listener*: will think and summarize the information, will fight against distractions in order to concentrate; will keep listening on a regular basis; will take notes and organise important information; will listen for ideas; will pay attention to the body language, tone, and style, and of course will listen to the speaker and respond when required [5, p.251] Good listeners can filter out distractions and focus on relevant information, which is crucial for effective thinking and memory consolidation.

It is worth considering that the oral basis that native English speakers possess is not shared by students learning English as a second language. Oral skills are taught before literacy skills for L1 learners; for L2 learners, on the other hand, literacy and oral

skills are typically introduced simultaneously. As a result, in order to accommodate the unique needs of L2 learners, teachers may need to adapt their L1 context practices while conducting extended listening in the L2 context. The integration of reading and listening builds students' confidence. Reading aloud and listening simultaneously before listening not only gives listeners useful context and minimizes linguistic barriers, but it also encourages students to pay closer attention to it. Selecting engaging readings that are appropriate for their level of language proficiency encourages pupils to continue listening. The secret to increasing fluency involves ongoing practice that only relies on listening. While it has been proven that reading and listening at the same time improves comprehension, practicing follow-up listening activities allows students to focus entirely on the listening assignment, which closes the learning cycle. S. Kumar and P. Lata say that listening activities tend to create high levels anxiety and stress and that is why teaching listening skills is one of the most challenging tasks for our students. So they propose some useful and important techniques for effective listening [Ibidem, p.255]:

- ✓ to improve students' listening skills, they should have an open mind;
- ✓ the effectiveness of listening depends on the intensity of the interest taken, their motivation;
- ✓ employ critical thinking while listening;
- ✓ observe the non-verbal clues of the speaker, as this will enable them to grasp the message;
- ✓ ask relevant questions, so that they could keep the track of the ideas from the recordings;
- ✓ paraphrase the message in simple words.

In both design and methodology, classroom receptive tasks have to mirror real-world reception. When decoding written or spoken texts, students must consider the text's overall meaning rather than its individual words and phrases, and they must consider the new vocabulary within its context. The teacher has to help the students use context clues to forecast meaning and elicit it. Students actively participate in the process of decoding information rather than being passive recipients of it in a real-world listening exercise [9, p.140]. With that in mind, as Gincu I. (2021) notices, in order to improve attentiveness, listening comprehension lessons should instill a verbal urgency for memorization. It is an important component of memory and ought to come from the lesson itself, not from the instructor. Enhancing students' instant recall is one of listening's objectives in order to lengthen their memory spans. The researcher argues that *listening is receive-*

ing, receiving requires thinking, and thinking requires memory; there is no way to separate listening, thinking, remembering [3, p.97] Listening is a crucial skill that significantly affects our thinking and memory process, thus, playing a vital role in effective communication and learning. Good listening skills enable clear understanding and effective response, enhancing interpersonal relationships and professional interactions. This skill is fundamental in educational settings and professional environments. Consequently, understanding and retaining spoken information is essential; it helps in understanding our students' perspectives, fostering empathy, and stronger emotional connections. It goes without saying that active listening engages critical thinking as students process and evaluate information in real-time. As a result, this involves analyzing the content, making inferences, and synthesizing new ideas. Therefore, teachers need to consider some questions about listening comprehension [2, p.234]:

- What are students doing when they listen?
- What factors affect good listening?
- What are the characteristics of "real-life" listening?
- What are the many things students listen for?
- What are some principles of designing listening techniques?
- How can listening techniques be interactive?
- What are some of the best techniques for teaching listening?

Listening actively supports critical thinking by allowing students to gather comprehensive information before forming judgments and opinions. When students listen attentively, they create stronger mental representations of the information, making it easier to recall later. Repetition and reinforcement through listening can aid in long-term retention. For instance, students say that when hearing a concept multiple times, this strengthens neural connections, and enhances memory retention. Listening demands perfect coordination between our ears and brain. So maintaining focus over prolonged periods improves the ability to understand and remember detailed information we are interested in. Effective listening can reduce misunderstandings and conflicts, lowering stress levels, which positively affects cognitive functions like thinking and memory. Engaging with content emotionally through listening can create stronger memories due to the emotional connection to the material.

Factors that lead to poor listening: Poor listeners often misunderstand the message, leading to errors and miscommunications. In educational contexts, students who are poor listeners may struggle to absorb and retain information, affecting their

academic performance. When it comes to listening, the primary issues are *phonological phenomena* including elision, assimilation, reduced forms, delivery rate, and background noises. Additionally, *the register* can be problematic because it can be challenging to grasp jargon and other non-standard or colloquial language. In this case, some of our students' micro-skills need to be developed [8, p.347; 2, p.238]:

- a. retaining chunks of language of different lengths;
- b. discriminating among the distinctive sounds of English;
- c. recognizing stress patterns (words in [un] stressed positions), rhythmic structure, intonational contours as well as their meaning;
- d. recognizing reduced forms;
- e. distinguishing word cores, boundaries;
- f. interpreting the significance of order;
- g. getting familiar with different registers and delivery rates;
- h. redundancy;
- i. performance variables;
- j. interaction.

As in the case of reading, understanding a spoken text will be facilitated by a number of listening strategies, such as [8, Apud. p.347]:

- looking for key words;
- looking for non-verbal cues;
- predicting the speaker's purpose on the basis of context;
- guessing;
- seeking clarification (in interactive listening tasks), as well as a number of exam DOs and DON'Ts, including:
 - a. try to understand the idea without understanding every word;
 - b. for multiple-choice tests: look at the questions and underline key words; look for synonyms;
 - c. for multiple choice: sometimes you will have to choose the closest or the least unlikely option;
 - d. look for question-related discourse markers: expressions for giving opinion if the task is to decide what people think; expressions for the realization of different functions;
 - e. for a gapped text – read the text before listening and try to predict what fills in the gaps: from factual information (what exactly) through approximating (what kind of information) to grammar clues (what grammatical category is needed);
 - f. for multiple matching: while listening for the first time try to extract the main idea every speaker expresses;
 - g. on most occasions, it is advisable to read the

task requirements/comprehension questions BEFORE listening.

Taking everything into consideration, teaching receptive skills requires both cognitive and meta-cognitive instruction. First and foremost, the teacher enhances the student's language proficiency while also assisting them in relying on contextual and co-textual cues; the latter appear to fall under the area of both cognition and metacognition, which is essentially the study of how tasks in general, such as reading and listening tasks, can be completed most successfully. It is essential to know what skills we want to develop because students are trying to get the whole message of the recording, **top-down listening**, but this process may be hampered by different listening barriers like idiom, phrasal verbs, limited vocabulary, or even more advanced vocabulary, **bottom-up obstacles** which can cause emotional disruptions in the process of speaking [4, p. 337]. The choice of wrong activities and poor organization of them at those three stages, *pre-listening*, *while-listening*, and *post listening* stages, wrong variety of language, techniques, strategies may contribute to the misinterpretation of the message. Poor listening results in incorrect or incomplete responses and this leads to psychological barriers, lack of interest to continue with the rest of the activities. Listening requires concentration, patience, organization, proper planning, and an environment devoid of fear in which students have the opportunity to work in pairs, groups to develop interper-

sonal communication. It is very helpful when we let them discuss the answers together and if they are stuck, we need to provide some help like playing the recording repeatedly, or play little bits of it in order to discuss the words, expressions they do not understand (*intensive listening*). This strategy will improve their listening comprehension. However, we need to encourage them to make use of *extensive listening* because different styles, topics help them to develop effortless listening and to overcome the barriers they may have [5, p.253].

Conclusions. Encouraging active listening in classrooms can improve students' performance by enhancing their ability to process and retain information, strengthen their relationships, and improve personal and professional outcomes; listening skills help them build effective relationships and facilitates solving problems. In professional environments, good listening skills can lead to better decision-making and problem solving. By recognizing the interplay between listening, thinking, and memory, students can develop better communication strategies, improve cognitive functions, and enhance their overall learning and performance. When we use verbal and non-verbal cues, we show that we are engaged and we understand them. If our students have misunderstandings and they want to clear them up, they should be encouraged to ask questions for clarification and summarize key points to ensure accurate understanding.

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