Developing Students' Listening Skills

Of the four main language skills, listening is perhaps the most crucial. This is because it is the skill most frequently used. Therefore, it is important to provide sufficient opportunities for students to learn and practice effective listening skills. This is especially the case for beginners, but still important for learners at all levels. This article begins by introducing a few general principles to think about when approaching the teaching of listening, it then delves into the processes required for successful comprehension and associated activity types, discusses the importance of a scaffolded approach to instruction, and ends by looking at strategies that learners can employ to develop their listening abilities and tackle various listening tasks.

General Considerations

When thinking about developing your students' listening skills, the first place to start is to consider the way you speak to them in the classroom. Try to maintain as much of your natural way of speaking as possible, but especially for lower-level students, consider slowing the pace, simplifying your vocabulary, using shorter and simpler sentences, and using slightly more and longer pauses.

For weaker students, many listening games and activities can be used that do not require a verbal response in English. Learners can simply respond physically to instructions such as in a game of 'Simon says…' or complete an activity that requires them to choose a picture or an object or complete a chart.

It is important in listening activities to give students a compelling reason to listen. Creating a more authentic purpose for listening encourages active listening. This can be achieved by having students discuss the general topic of the text before listening and generating a list of questions they hope to have answered by the text. Integrating listening with other skills can also be a useful way of encouraging more active and purposeful listening. If students are aware that content within the listening text is going to be used in a subsequent writing task, students have a very immediate and real motivation to employ active listening.

Many of the listening tasks we set students in the classroom ask them to focus on the very minute details of the text. However, this type of listening does not always reflect the real-life type of listening they will need to perform outside of the classroom. The type of listening required for taking accurate notes in a lecture is very different from that required in an everyday conversation. Therefore, it is useful to give students the opportunity to practice different listening styles for different situations and tasks.

Bottom-up and Top-down Processing

As in reading, bottom-up and top-down processing play crucial roles in listening comprehension. There can be a tendency for teachers to favour activities that are more top-down focused such as comprehension questions, predicting, or listing. However, bottom-up focused activities that allow students to focus on language features such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary also require special attention. The value of bottom-up processing is that it helps students to comprehend a text more easily by recognising lexical and pronunciation features. For this reason, bottom-up listening activities are particularly suited to lower-level learners as it helps build their language range. With consistent exposure to bottom-up activities, students should, over time, process messages received as aural input with increased speed and accuracy.

Activity types that help improve bottom-up processing include identifying individual sounds and stressed words and syllables, distinguishing between thought groups, paying attention to grammar forms and functions, and recognising linking words and phrases.

Top-down processing relies on activating the prior knowledge and experience that students bring to the task as a way of utilising the informational input derived from bottom-up processing. To extract meaning from a text, students match what they know about the topic in terms of the context, speakers, subjects, and the wider world to the comprehensible input they receive.

Listening activity types that help improve top-down processing include listening for macro features such as the gist, central topic, and main ideas, listening for specific details, ordering key ideas, and making predictions and inferences.

Teach Listening with a Scaffolded Approach

Listening can present a particular challenge for language learners because of the linguistic and cognitive processing it requires and because unlike a reading text, students do not have the convenience of skimming and scanning through the content. Consequently, many learners, particularly weaker ones, find listening intimidating and approach listening tasks with a lack of confidence.

Therefore, to help students tackle listening tasks with more confidence, a scaffolded approach is recommended. Scaffolding is the use of a variety of instructional techniques designed to move students toward a better understanding and greater independence in the learning process. For listening, this might include exposing students initially to more simple listening texts before gradually increasing the complexity of texts as the course progresses. It may also involve the teacher describing or illustrating a concept or process in several ways to ensure understanding. Students could also be exposed, in the first few classes, to the types of listening tasks they will encounter in the course. A scaffolding technique teachers often use in lessons is to preview key or difficult vocabulary before tackling a listening task. Scaffolding should also involve teachers making the purpose of a listening activity clear, providing simple and easy-to-follow directions, and ensuring that learners are aware of the learning goals they are expected to achieve. Students should also be helped to understand how the current lesson builds on the knowledge and skills covered in previous lessons.

Every listening lesson should begin with a pre-listening stage in which students are properly prepared to engage in the task. In most cases, pre-teaching vocabulary is crucial to this stage. In addition, students should be familiarised with who is speaking and what the context of the listening is. Knowing that the text is an academic lecture will set up different expectations in the learners' minds versus knowing that it is a telephone conversation between a customer and a travel agent.

Before the first listening, set a clear task for students to perform. For example, if listening to an academic lecture, have the students take note of any language that introduces a main idea or examples that illustrate a point. This helps students make valid predictions about the language and information they will hear and gives them a clear purpose for listening.

Simply playing an audio track one time from beginning to end does not serve students well. A better approach is to provide multiple opportunities to listen and to bring focus to particular sections or features of the text. It may be useful to, as a first listening, to play the audio all the way through from the beginning and focus on general and gist level questions. During a second listening, questions can focus on more specific details. Depending on the aim of the lesson, a follow-up could be to focus on specific sections to draw attention to language features such as keywords or the use of signposting language.

Many listening activities simply ask students to test their comprehension of specific detail in the text such as a date or a name. However, this ignores much of what else students can gather from a listening. It might be of more value to engage students in tasks that require them to pay attention to the context, or the emotions and motivations of the speaker. "What did the professor say was the most serious effect of global warming?" involves a lower level of processing than a question such as "Why did the teacher stress or emphasise the word 'serious'? Context-related questions allow students to delve into deeper layers of meaning than standard comprehension questions allow.

Listening Strategies

English language learners who exhibit a high level of listening proficiency can be distinguished by the strategies they employ. Strategies can simply be thought of as the ways a listener approaches and manages a listening task.

Listening strategies can be classified into two simple categories. The first of these is cognitive strategies which involve understanding messages and processing associated input so that it can be stored and retrieved in memory. The second is meta-cognitive strategies which involve conscious or subconscious thinking about selecting and applying cognitive strategies. This may include evaluating the requirements of the task, monitoring how effectively one is completing the task, self-evaluating performance post-task, and self-testing to assess the effectiveness of one's strategy use.

Teachers can provide opportunities in the classroom for students to practice and develop meta-cognitive strategies for listening. The first of these is planning. This is important as it helps students become more independent learners. Planning encourages students to set learning objectives and figure out ways to meet them. These objectives can focus on two broad areas – general listening development and specific listening tasks. General listening development objectives could be as simple as expanding topic vocabulary range or increasing exposure to different genres of listening texts. Specific learning task objectives might include previewing the topic through discussion, brainstorming, or paying attention to signposting language during a listening.

For the second meta-cognitive strategy, monitoring, teachers can provide opportunities for students to gauge their learning progress. In terms of general listening development, students can be encouraged to reflect on their progress against certain criteria such as descriptors for proficiency scales (CEFR or IELTS) or syllabus learning outcomes. Students can also be helped to set personal learning objectives against which to measure progress. Monitoring can also be employed by students during the completion of a listening task by checking their understanding while listening or trying to determine the source of a specific comprehension difficulty, which may be something like unfamiliarity with the topic vocabulary.

A final meta-cognitive strategy is evaluating the success of meeting a learning objective or completing a learning activity. For general listening development, measuring progress against specific criteria can also be used as an evaluation tool. However, where evaluation brings particular value is in having students try to assess the effectiveness of strategies employed in their learning and practice and reflecting on the appropriateness and utility of personal learning objectives. As for specific learning tasks, evaluating can be particularly useful for students to assess the success of the particular strategies used in completing a task.

In contexts where meta-cognitive strategies have been used, students tend to demonstrate realimprovements in their listening ability. Through the use of meta-cognitive strategies, learners develop a clearer understanding of the requirements and demands of typical listening tasks, develop an increased sense of competence in being able to successfully complete tasks, and develop a set of strategies that allow them to cope with more challenging listening texts.

Sequencing a Lesson to Practice Meta-cognitive Strategies

An activity that incorporates many of the meta-cognitive strategies described above could have the following sequence.

Pre-listening: in groups or pairs, students brainstorm words, phrases, or key points that they might expect to be mentioned in the text.

First listening: While listening, students mark all the items generated during the brainstorming they were able to predict. They should also note any new information they hear that they think might be important for comprehending the text.

Follow-up discussion: in pairs or small groups, students discuss and compare what they have understood from an initial listening and any strategies they used to best comprehend the listening. They then note down any parts of the text which caused disagreement or confusion so that they can focus on these for the next listening.

Second listening: students listen and pay close attention to the parts where there was disagreement and confusion and revise their notes by making corrections and adding new detail that was missed the first time.

Post listening discussion: as a whole class and led by the teacher, students share the content of their notes verbally to confirm comprehension and discuss the various strategies used among the group.

As the article has shown, there are many factors to consider and approaches that can be utilised to make listening lessons more engaging and effective. Listening tasks can be very stressful and intimidating for students. However, by having a better understanding of how the comprehension process works, knowing how to make tasks more manageable, and giving students the tools to become more independent and conscientious learners, teachers can help them to alleviate these anxieties and become more self-assured and competent listeners.