

Teaching Listening to Bangladeshi Students at Tertiary Level

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Abstract: *English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone a gradual transformation over time in Bangladesh. We know that, to become a proficient speaker of English, one need to possess the four skills of English language – reading, writing, listening & speaking. Among these, listening & speaking skills are most neglected in the curriculum of English in schools and colleges in Bangladesh. Because of inattention to listening skill in the English language classes, students continue to stay behind in comprehending and generating spoken English, in this manner failing to achieve the target of communicative competence. This paper focuses on the importance of Listening along with the problems faced by the teachers as well as students in the listening classes in Bangladesh. The result of a small scale survey is included showing the feelings of students to listening and at the end of the paper, some recommendations are made to overcome the obstacles of a listening class.*

Keywords: *Listening, communicative competence, strategy, listener, motivation.*

I. Introduction

In Bangladesh, English is studied as a second language. In the last twenty years, English has gained a significant space as the medium of pedagogy at tertiary level. The rapid growth of English medium schools and colleges also contributed to the vast usage of English both in and out of classroom. However, little consideration is given to teaching listening as most of the classes lack logistic facilities. Language learning is learning to communicate (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 156). But this communication cannot get fulfillment without listening skill. If the learner is not being able to understand what the speaker is saying then there is no valid communication. To become a fluent speaker in English, learners need to be good listener first. According to Jeremy Harmer (1998:98), “Exposure to language is a fundamental requirement for anyone wanting to learn it. Listening to appropriate tapes provides such exposure and students get vital information not only about grammar and vocabulary but also about pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, pitch and stress.” So it can be said that, learners should be provided with more and more listening tasks so that they can get themselves familiar with different accents and phrase patterns of English.

Importance of Listening: “One of the main reasons for getting students to listen to spoken English is to let them hear different varieties and accents – rather than just the voice of their teacher with its own idiosyncrasies” (Harmer 1998: 97). There are many reasons to validate the learning of listening. Learners should listen to understand which words and phrases are coherent in a given context. In this regard they must have good knowledge of English vocabulary. It has been noticed among the students of Bangladesh that, lack of enough vocabulary is one of the chief shortcomings of learning listening. If the students are not familiar with the meaning of the word and/ or phrase pronounced, then how can they be able to understand the message transmitted. So learning vocabulary is of paramount importance to learn listening accurately. Understanding and familiarizing with new manner of pronunciations is one of the goals of learning listening. It is also necessary to know the tone of the speaker and in what speed they are speaking and in which words are they putting stress. Above all, communicative competence is the desired goal (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 156) of listening.

Hindrances to Listening: According to Brown (2006: 02), “One very important idea for teaching listening is that listening courses must make use of students’ prior knowledge in order to improve listening comprehension”. However, in Bangladesh, it is very challenging for a teacher to know how much previous knowledge of English a student possesses before entering into a university, as students are from different schooling backgrounds. Needs analysis is given priority in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), but many teachers are unable to do a needs analysis in Bangladeshi context, sometimes because of lack of time for research, sometimes because of huge administrative tasks and sometimes because of indifference on the teachers’ part. From the experience of this author it has been seen that, students are not aware of why they should study listening and often it is intimidating for them to learn listening as this kind of task was not included in their school or college curriculum. Students face various problems while learning listening for the first time in a university setting. Depending on the students’ background of Bangladesh, the problems can be divided into the following categories:

- (a) **Social Problem:** As throughout their student lives from class I – XII, most students emphasized only English reading and writing skills, they are unable to grasp the importance of listening skill. The society or the educational environment is not English friendly, that is, students are not open to English speaking and listening environment. They only speak English when their teacher asks and do not get the opportunity to listen English much except from their English teachers. As they don't know much about the English culture and lifestyle of the native English speakers, they are afraid of listening. So, it can be said that, lack of familiarity or absence of exposure to English listening in the society is one of the main obstacles to acquire listening skill.
- (b) **Conventional Teaching Methods:** In Bangladesh, Most of the freshmen to University comes with the schema that, a teacher's task is to deliver lecture while they sit in the class passively. This is a problem for the university teachers as they must make the students believe that learning is not a one way process, it is a two way process. Students must participate in classroom activities. If teachers reflect on how to maximize the benefits of the students and prepare their lessons accordingly then it will be easier for students to have a clear idea of the topics. Lack of appropriate classroom activities is one of the drawbacks of listening classes. Often teachers use the activities which are easy to use than which are justifiable to use to a certain learner group. Teacher – centeredness in language classrooms in Bangladesh is a common problem. Teachers can shift this attitude by encouraging students' to talk informally in the classroom. If students can share their fears and funny experiences of life, then the classes will be more interactive and less disturbing.
- (c) **Lack of Motivation:** Motivation plays a vital role in learner's educational achievement. Without proper motivation a learner cannot achieve success. As English is the second language in Bangladesh and not much used in everyday conversations, students cannot form the habit of listening and speaking, as a result their level of proficiency remains inadequate. Besides, there is the constant fear of being poked by their friends and classmates. Learners are often demotivated by this negative attitude. The reason for mocking a person who tries to speak and listen to English varies. Sometimes, a learner is mocked because of his/ her wrong pronunciation or exaggerated British accent, sometimes because his/ her friends' think the learner is trying to be smarter than them or just because they feel like embarrassing the learner. The teacher can act as a counselor in this regard and build and foster motivation.

II. Review of the Literature

In this section of the paper, I would like to discuss some views of scholars on teaching listening. According to Vandergrift (1999: 168), "Listening comprehension is anything but a passive activity. It is a complex, active process in which the learner must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance." As the Bangladeshi students did not have much English listening experience, "some general listening materials and listening tasks must be included to provide exposure to the sound system of English. As recommended by most researchers, a variety of texts and tasks with lots of opportunity for practice is the best option" (Alam&Sinha, 2009). As the duration of class is limited, teachers have to be judicious and highlight the academic skills. According to Harmer (1998: 99), "Experience of informal spoken English together with an appreciation of other spoken factors – the tone of the voice, the intonation the speakers use, rhythm, and background noise – will help students to tease meaning out of such speech phenomena". Development of computer and the initiation of CD (Compact Disk) and DVD (Digital Video Disk) technology has eradicated the need for ancient tape-recorder to listen and record audios. Nowadays, with the help of computer, a teacher can easily conduct listening practice and class tests. One drawback of tape-recorder was that, students had to listen while there may be "distracting noise in the background" (Alam&Sinha, 2009) or vague sound of recording, however, at present, using individual headphones or earphones in listening classes has increased students' efficiency. Besides, students can record their own voice in the computer and compare those with the authentic listening audios those were provided by the teacher. "Extensive and intensive listening" (Harmer 2001: 228) is helpful for improving learner's listening abilities.

The teacher's role as a facilitator and manager is very crucial in a listening class. He/ she have to prepare and modify the listening lessons according to the learner's stages of talent. In order to gain some knowledge of what and how the students' think of listening as a skill and how they would like the teachers to take listening class, I conducted a small scale investigation. At this point, I would like to draw attention on the survey and its outcomes.

III. Methodology

The survey was performed among fifty (50) Bangladeshi students of tertiary or university level who came from different socio-economic backgrounds. The location of the university is outside of capital Dhaka. Age group of the participants is between 18 to 20 years and all of them completed 12 years of English studies from primary to intermediate or college level.

In order to find out the problems of the listening classes in university level, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed among students. Students were instructed to answer the questions as truthfully as possible without any intimidation. They were also asked to give their opinion on how the listening classes should be designed to benefit the students at tertiary level.

IV. Results and analysis

The first question of the survey was whether the learners have done any listening and/ or speaking course in their school or college life and all of them answered unanimously that they did not experience any of the courses previously and it is completely new to them at this level. This answer indicates why the students have low listening skill in English. If they had been exposed to practical listening in school or college then they would have been effective listeners by now. The second question was, among the four skills of English (reading, writing, listening & speaking), in which skill they feel weak and 45% of the students answered that speaking is the most difficult skill followed by listening which was the answer of 40% of the students. Writing is difficult for 10% students and reading is for 5% of the total students. From these answers, it is obvious that listening is one of the challenging skills in English and teachers and education administrators should pay more attention to teaching listening. The third question was, as they are presently attending a listening course in the university, what are the problems they face in a typical listening class. Students were asked to prioritize the problems – undistinguishable audios, foreign accents, lack of previous knowledge of vocabulary, lack of pre-listening activities, culturally unfamiliar topics, lack of motivation, and lack of logistic support. Figure 1 below shows student’s responses.

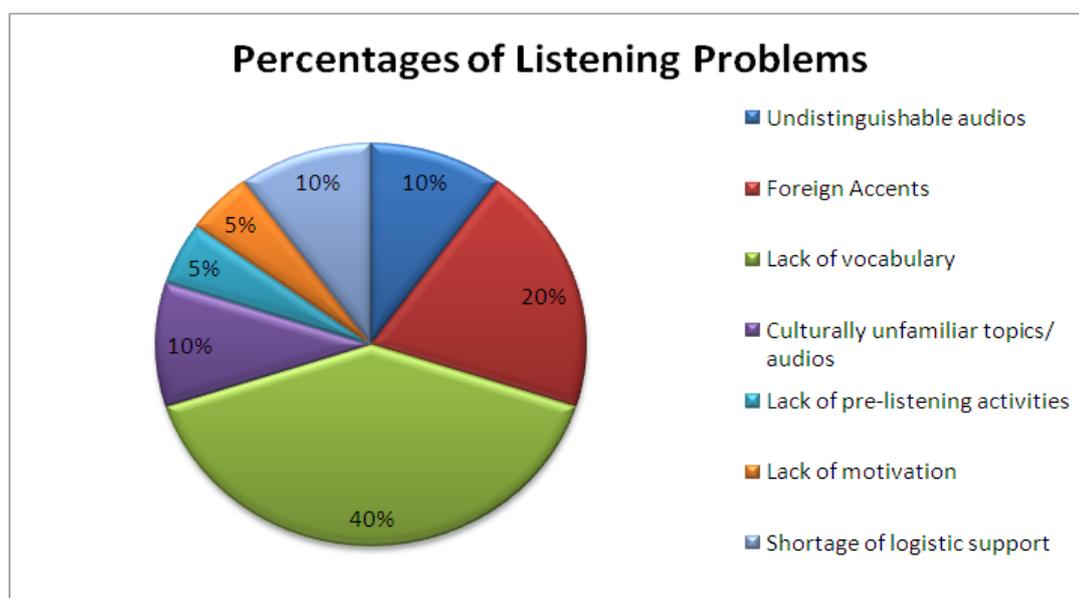


Figure 1: Showing the problems of English Listening *in percentage* of University students.

From the above chart it is clear that, words which are not previously known to students or lack of vocabulary poses a great risk to effective listening. Lack of familiarity with British and American accents which are foreign accents to a non-native English learner is the second most important factor to bar from successful listening. In the answers to the question, “how did you practice listening at home?” 60% of the students answered that they only practice the books and audio items suggested by the course teacher. 30% opined that they watch English music and documentaries besides ‘suggested’ books and 10% said that they use internet to download and practice audio. On the question, “did you benefit from the listening course?” 90% of the participants said they benefitted ‘very much’ while the rest held the view that they were moderately benefitted.

Students gave their valuable opinion on the questions “how the listening classes should be designed?” and “what items should be added or deleted from listening activities?” According to them, headphones and acoustic devices which are used in a listening class should be checked before classroom use and these items should be of good quality. A lot of British and American vocabulary with pronunciation should be taught

interestingly at the class. Outside noise is barrier to good listening therefore; sound proof language laboratory should be established and maintained. Echo problem should also be sorted out. Students also mentioned that they would like to have the opportunity to speak in any specific topic for 10 to 15 minutes so that they become accustomed to each other's English pronunciation. Items such as audio quiz and puzzles can be used for better listening involvement.

Limitations of the Survey: I am aware of the fact that the survey was conducted in a small scale among university students and the results should be applied carefully to a greater population. I worked with a small number of students (i.e. 50) and all of them are from the same private university in Bangladesh. The research would have been better if I could include the views of teachers and students of public universities. I also did not try to discover the beliefs of the administrators. A more wide-ranging scenario of listening classes would have come out if I could include more variables in this research.

V. Recommendations

After considering the survey result and drawbacks of the listening classes at tertiary level in Bangladesh, I would like to recommend the following points to improve listening competence in ESL classes:

- ✓ Teachers should be trained to teach English listening skills in an effective way. University Grants Commission (UGC) should take necessary action to provide the training. In this regard, National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM), Dhaka can cooperate with UGC. Teachers and educators should come forward to provide ideas on how to improve listening lessons at class.
- ✓ School, College and University administration should provide logistic support to teach listening in a positive study environment.
- ✓ Teachers should arrange a variety of listening activities for practice and audio and video lessons should be demonstrated. As Harmer (1998: 108) said, "video is richer than audio tape. Speakers can be seen. Their body movements give clues as to meaning, so do the clothes they wear, their location etc. Background information can be filled in visually." Activities such as dialogues in real life situation, monologue by a marketing officer, audio quizzes, telephone conversations, airport announcements, hotel reservation via telephone are very good ways to enhance listening capacity of the learners.
- ✓ To teach vocabulary for listening tasks, teachers can group certain words in a specific category and teach those to learners in pre-listening and post-listening period. If the learners know how to use the words in a proper context, then it will be easier for them to remember those.
- ✓ Above all, teachers should be patient, friendly and cooperative to get the maximum result from teaching listening. She/ he should have a smiling face and an approachable etiquette so that students' can express their opinion freely about listening lessons.

VI. Conclusion

According to David Nunan (2003: 24), "listening usually happens in real time. That is, people listen and have to comprehend what they hear immediately. There is no time to go back and review, look up unknown words, etc". So the teacher has to adapt listening materials for better understanding of the learners. In the beginning, the teachers should provide easier listening tasks and gradually go for the advanced tasks. From the discussion in this paper, it can be said that, listening classes in tertiary level in Bangladesh will be more interesting and effective if the teachers understands the problems behind active listening and prepare their lessons accordingly. It is to be mentioned that, the university administration must cooperate with the teachers with enough logistic support so that the students get maximum benefit from listening classes. Teachers should not pressure too much on students' memories and should try to make listening focused. They should help students build confidence in their listening capability. Thus the students will form the habit of powerful listening and can have an enjoyable second language learning experience.

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