



Students' Active Involvement in the Creation of Authentic Listening Inputs used in a Listening Lesson: An Alternative Approach

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Abstract: Despite the fact that students will devote at least fifty percent of their learning attempts in the second language in listening, this skill is often taken for granted and overlooked by teachers (Nunan, 1998). This realization calls for a change in the way listening is approached in the second language classroom. It is important that listening is no more treated as a passive activity but as a dynamic process, integrating all four skills and involving students' active participation (Morley, 1999). In this vein, the article presents a listening lesson that focuses on learners' need to "learn to listen" rather than "listen to learn" (Vandergrift, 2004: 3). What is more important though is that the learners themselves contributed to the creation of the authentic listening texts they were exposed to, being interviewed for an environmental experience they have actually lived.

Keywords: listening instruction, authentic inputs, active involvement

Apstrakt: Uprkos činjenici da će učenici, kada uče strani jezik, posvetiti barem pedeset posto vremena aktivnostima slušanja, ova veština se uglavnom uzima zdravo za gotovo, i uglavnom joj nastavnici ne posvećuju dovoljno pažnje (Nunan, 1998). Ovakvo stanje stvari nam govori da je krajnje vreme da se promeni način pristupa razvijanju veštine slušanja kod učenika. Važno je da se slušanje ne tretira više kao pasivna aktivnost, nego kao dinamičan proces, koji integriše sve četiri veštine i angažuje učenike da aktivno učestvuju (Morley, 1999). U ovom članku je predstavljen čas slušanja koji se fokusira na potrebi učenika da "nauče da slušaju", radije nego da "slušaju da bi naučili" (Vandergrift, 2004). Ono što je još važnije je to da su sami učenici doprineli kreiranju autentičnih tekstova za slušanje kojima su bili izloženi dok su bili intervjuisani u vezi sa nečim što su zaista iskusili.

Ključne reči: instrukcije za aktivnosti slušanja, autentični input, aktivno učešće

1. LISTENING IN THE TRADITIONAL ELT CLASSROOM

The diachronic role of listening is nicely underlined by Nunan (2002) who characterizes it as the 'Cinderella' of the skills. In the past, instructors

teaching English used to connect knowledge of a second language to the ability to speak and write in this language, considering therefore listening and reading as secondary skills.

Learners underwent extensive instruction on how to speak and write but not on how to speak and listen, as these skills were supposed to be acquired automatically (Nunan, 2002).

A quick look at the bibliography concerning listening demonstrates that in the traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom, listening was merely treated as a bottom-up process. It thus involved the comprehension of various parts of the listening extracts in a linear fashion in order to understand its whole meaning. Mendelsohn (2001) successfully compares this procedure to the placement of links to a chain, each having its specific order. It was believed that learners started their comprehension attempts by decoding phonemic units to forms words, they proceeded by linking words to form sentences and they completed comprehension by joining sentences to form larger utterances (Nunan, 2002). Anderson and Lynch (1988) called this approach of listening “*listener as a tape recorder view*”, to compare listeners attempts to the

way a tape recorder records each word, sentence and then whole utterances.

Every now and then though, different approaches appearing in the ELT field, assigned a more central role to listening. Affected by the principles of the *Audiolingual Method*, an approach extremely popular during the 1980s and 1990s, listening gained a prominent position in the ELT class. Nevertheless, listening was not an interpretative process. It was rather utilized as a habit formation technique, with learners listening to various linguistic drills and repeating in a parrot-like way. Listening main aim was to boost learners’ memorization of endless dialogues and sentences (Richards, 2008).

The majority of the ELT teaching materials presented listening texts as a compilation of inputs isolated from real life and context (Mendelsohn, 2001), treating listening as a product rather than as a process. It is indicative that many of them did not include pre-listening activities to activate students’ existing schemata but

introduced the task in a barren way, promoting thus “*listening as testing*”, a philosophy known to maximize students’ anxiety of failure (Sheerin, 1987). As Mendelsohn (2001: 3) successfully puts it, what seems to be teaching how to listen it is actually testing listening, as the notion “*listen and answer the questions, but I am not going to teach you how to do it*”, was very common in the English-speaking classroom.

2. THE CONTEMPORARY APPROACH TO USING LISTENING IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

Nowadays, the significance of listening is increasingly being recognized. Having as a starting point Krashen’s (1982) theory of comprehensible input, listening texts were more widely utilized in order to provide all the necessary input that, when in the appropriate level, they can become intake.

Considered to be an active process, many ELT educationalists thus started treating listening as a bottom-up process (Mendelsohn, 2001). In this holistic approach,

learners move from the whole to part, utilizing all their interpretive skills. Listeners are expected to formulate a hypothesis about the content of the listening texts from the very first seconds of the listening extract, which they modify it when necessary (Mendelsohn, 2001). It must be also pinpointed that background knowledge plays a crucial role for successful comprehension. It is important that listeners have some prior knowledge of the listening topic and be at the same time able to recognize its context and situation.

Nowadays, many educationalists consider listening as a *strategic activity*, demanding a variety of skills on behalf of the learners. According to Field (2002) teachers should always keep in mind that nonnative speakers usually understand less than instructors themselves believe, so they make guesses which are linked to fragmented pieces of the listening input. It is therefore ELT teachers’ responsibility to present and frequently revise the necessary listening strategies and encourage

their students to take risks when confronted with oral speech.

It seems that the teaching philosophy concerning listening is changing towards a more communicative and real-life orientation. The real focus of listening is moving towards the connection between comprehension and cultural, social and affective factors as well as the impact of visual stimuli and background knowledge (Lynch, 1998).

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC LISTENING MATERIALS IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

The increased utilization of authentic listening materials can be considered as an undeniable advancement in the field of applied linguistics in ELT Field (2002).

According to Porter and Roberts (1981), *authenticity* is related to the language produced by a real speaker for a real audience in order to convey a real message. Nevertheless, authenticity is no longer restricted to native

speakers, as more and more voices are currently in favor of the notion of “World Englishes” (Kachru, 1990).

The advantages of real life recordings are numerous for the ELT listener. To begin with, recordings of authentic speech expose learners to the rhythms and intonation of real life English in a way that scripted material cannot possibly do (Field, 2002). Moreover, authentic-in-nature texts are extremely good exemplars of the current use of language and they tend to be more rich in cultural data (Mishan, 2005).

A study conducted by Gilmore (2007) in a Japanese university demonstrated that the students who were exposed to authentic material made statistically proven listening improvements than this group of learners that was exclusively exposed to scripted listening input. Obviously, contact with authentic texts is linked to a wider range of intonation, pronunciation and linguistic features.

More importantly, the utilization of authentic listening material in the

ELT classroom is connected to an increase in the learners' motivation. Guariento and Morley (2001) believe that learners are more motivated to learn when dealing with authentic texts as they feel that they learn the "real language". The same claim is supported by Otte (2006) who has found that learners' self-satisfaction and motivational levels have improved considerably after working with authentic texts.

To sum up, authentic listening inputs aid learners acquire language faster by producing more complicated utterances (Harmer, 1998), help students detect cultural information and they are more related to their needs (Richarson, 2001), by being highly motivating (Otte, 2006).

4. LEARNERS' ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN THE CREATION OF THE LISTENING INPUTS

For this listening lesson, the A2 learners were invited to create the listening inputs that would be used by their teacher.

Based on an actual event, the students' participation in the

cleaning of the local beach, the teacher decided to record four short interviews, depicting the students' actual experience.

The students were thus divided in four groups of four people. They were the interviewees and the teacher was the interviewer. The learners were given the list of the questions in advance and were asked to prepare them by keeping notes. Thus, the recordings are semi-scripted because the learners' performance was not based on a script, already written by the teacher, but it was guided by Burgess' *ideational framework grids* (Sifakis et al., 2004), allowing them to make their personal contribution to the inputs, rather than being mere readers of a written dialogue.

Finally, the recordings took place in the playground of the school in order to incorporate the authentic touch of background noise. The teacher interviewer played the role of a reporter of the local TV station, while the students answered her questions, having their real identities. Even though some

interviews were recorded twice, the outcome was satisfactory.

5. THE CRITERIA UNDERLYING THE CREATION OF THE ORIGINAL LISTENING TEXTS

Despite being mainly driven by the students, the teacher's guidelines, prior and through the creation of the listening texts, ensured that their creation adhered to specific criteria.

To begin with, the students were advised to sound as natural as possible. The pupils' natural flow of speech and even some minor grammatical and syntactical errors were not corrected to assign an authentic characteristic to the text. Accordingly, the existence of fillers, hesitations, different accents, various speech rates, background noise, repetitions, pauses and rising and falling intonation are distinctive features of its genuine identity (Rost, 2011). As far as the content of the inputs is concerned, it is highly transactional and message-oriented since it narrates

and describes an environmental event that took place in the students' community.

In terms of the input's level of difficulty, its creation was mainly guided by Krashen's *comprehensible input hypothesis*, according to which students learn when exposed to language they comprehend (Rost, 2011). It follows the *i+1 principle* suggesting that students should be exposed to input slightly above their present level. What is more, Grice's *four maxims* concerning unambiguous communication were also taken into consideration (Rost, 2011). Despite the fact that the text is an *i+1* level of difficulty, its informative nature is appropriate to the age of the specific group of schoolchildren (10-11 years old) (*maxim of quantity*). Accordingly, as the text describes a real event of local interest, it thus communicates true information (*maxim of quality*), which is relevant to students' interests and age (*maxim of relation*). It must be also mentioned that all messages stemming from the input are clear and presented in an orderly way (*maxim of manner*).

Similarly, a learning aspect that was not overlooked when creating the listening texts was the notion of motivation. The majority of the decisions regarding not only the input's theme but also its protagonists and the tasks accompanying it, were dictated by the following words uttered by Corder "*given motivation it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language* (Corder, 1974 in Mishan, 2005 in Rost, 2011: 158). Motivated learners are the main concern of the socio-cultural hypothesis in which goals and motives are of paramount importance.

Last but not least, the general layout of the listening input was developed to match the limitations imposed by Brown's *cognitive loads principle* (Rost, 2011). In this view, each one of the four listening contains few participants with a clear relationship between them (schoolmates and friends). The *spatiality* is familiar to the students with the interview taking place at the playground of their school and the content is easily comprehensible, following the

question-answer pattern. Finally, students are not expected to make many inferences but rather "witness" the description of a past event.

6. THE STRUCTURE OF THE LISTENING LESSON

The lesson therefore follows the warm-up, pre, while, post and follow-up distinction, which is widely applicable for the receptive skills.

Initially, the lesson starts by using visual aids to activate students' background knowledge (Warm-up). Displaying two photographs showing young children cleaning a beach, successfully links what is heard with learners' prior knowledge and experience. Similarly, the brainstorming task "digs up" linguistically useful lexis from the long-term to the short-term memory.

The pre-listening activity is an environmental quiz which apart from contextualizing the input and raising students' environmental awareness, also integrates the skill of speaking, as it is done as group

work. During this stage, learners have a first contact with the actual recordings in order to check if their answers to the environmental quiz are correct.

During the while-listening stage, the students listen to the recordings this time with the aim of listening for specific information. Therefore, its task involves a note-taking exercise, promoting the skill of writing and the recognition of spots on a map. These activities are quite familiar and motivating for the students and demand hard-focus attention.

As far as the post-listening stage is concerned, the learners collaborate in four groups of four in order to think and present four different slogans promoting the significance of students' participation in environmental actions.

Lastly, a semi-formal task is assigned as homework to integrate the skill of writing into the learning sequence. Learners are asked to write an article drawing ideas from the notepad and from the text's transcription.

7. THE METHODOLOGICAL PRESENTATION OF THE LESSON

The specific listening lesson is completely different from those typically experienced by students. As indicated previously, the students had the opportunity to utilize both their receptive and productive skills in order to successfully achieve the creation of the listening inputs.

The original lesson's main objective is not only to place listening at the centre of the learning procedure but also to allow learners to have an active contribution to the creation of the listening inputs. In this "learning to listen" situation, students are expected to use an abundance of micro-skills related to the abilities to recognize features of spoken speech and process language semantically and pragmatically in order to do the tasks. The previous overview of the tasks accompanying the listening texts demonstrates the existence of various parameters, regarding the choices made during their creation. Firstly, designing

motivating and student-friendly tasks was a top priority to assure students' willingness for participation and to lower their affective filter. Accordingly, many tasks were assigned as group work in an attempt to decrease anxiety and establish a sense of security in the EFL classroom. Secondly, the tasks successfully integrated all the skills since "*depending on the learner's needs, interests as well as syllabus specifications, all the skills should be used in all stages*" (Sifakis et al., 2004, 213). Furthermore, the tasks' level of difficulty ranged from simple to more demanding, with easy and difficult items co-existing in all tasks, to match the competence of a mixed ability class. Additionally, all the rubrics were not the traditional type found in most course books but were written in a way imitating real life and were extremely detailed and unambiguous. Lastly, it must be mentioned that the specific listening prioritized learning as opposed to testing, so students are encouraged to provide the necessary feedback to their

classmates (*peer feedback*) or even correct their own personal performance (*self correction*) under the guidance of the teacher (Harmer, 1998).

A closer look at the tasks is essential for determining the philosophy of the specific original lesson. All the tasks follow the principles of *the metacognition hypothesis* (Rost, 2011). Teaching learners to obtain the capacity to process languages and get responsible of their own learning (*learners' autonomy*) is the main goal of this educational theory which is, although often taken for granted by teachers, extremely significant (Hedge, 2000).

The warm-up stage uses visual stimuli to enhance background knowledge. It is widely accepted that schemata and scripts activation facilitates learning in various ways. According to Sanders and Gernsbacher's *structure building theory* (Rost, 2011), comprehension is achieved if language and outside world are connected.

The while-listening stage brings the outside world in the classroom on

the grounds that both exercises necessitate skills that students will definitely encounter or have encountered during their lives. The post-listening task offers learners the opportunity to be implicated in an amusing activity boosting the speaking skill. It was selected with reference to the *interaction hypothesis* (Rost, 2011) which states that engaging students in spoken interaction after listening to a text is a fruitful experience from which students benefit immensely. Allowing students to have access to the text's transcription, even assigned as homework task, is considerably useful because it puts oral speech into written form, clarifying any misunderstandings. It is also an opportunity for *proof-reading* (Lynch, 2001 in Rost, 2011) as hopefully, learners will subconsciously notice various linguistic forms while reading the transcript for their homework (*processability hypothesis*).

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As with any new teaching approach utilized in the classroom for the first

time, its outcomes should be evaluated by the teacher.

To be more precise, the majority of the main and subsidiary aims were adequately met. Learners were faced with authentic-in-nature texts and used all their skills and strategies, first to create them and then to comprehend and deal with the tasks accompanying them. They learned and revised useful vocabulary, used spoken English, collaborated, enriched their general knowledge, became aware of an environmental problem and had a beneficial forty-minute learning experience. The students were motivated throughout the lesson and seemed to enjoy the procedure since there were minimum hijacks and lack of attention. More importantly, they expressed themselves using English, without resorting to the mother tongue, which is by itself one of the most important achievements of the original lesson. Furthermore, they reacted successfully to the *i+1level* of difficulty using all their schemata, with even weakest students eager to participate.

The specific article attempted thus to indicate that the current instruction of listening should encourage the active involvement of students. Of course, for this lessons learners were more than actively involved as they created the listening extracts themselves. It should therefore be stressed that this learning experience can be

recapitulated in three words: personalization, engagement and motivation. Achieving the maximum of listening lessons means improving learners' strategies, encouraging learner autonomy and peer feedback, using a variety of tasks and teaching students to listen to learn (Harmer, 1998 · Woodward, 2001).

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