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Developing Listening Skill of ESL Learners through Interactive Listening Activities

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ABSTRACT

The global status of English has led to significant changes in English Language Teaching and Learning. There is now a greater awareness among teachers of concepts, such as learner-centeredness and task-based learning. Learner-centered approach to language learning is considered effective by many ELT practitioners and teachers as compared to traditional approach.

In this paper, an attempt is made to find ways to successfully develop Listening Skills of undergraduates through learner-centered interactive listening activities. Since teaching listening skill is a challenging task, especially in an ESL scenario, where there are many obstacles in learning process such as: lack of suitable materials for teaching listening skill, Shortage of qualified teachers with good pronunciation, and lack of innovative methods for teaching listening skills. In this context, firstly the problems of undergraduate (B.E.) learners of Hyderabad with regard to their educational background, listening and speaking apprehensions are analyzed and then an attempt is made to design suitable tasks for developing Listening skills. The material is taken from internet (famous speeches, TED talks etc.), tasks (as effective strategies) were designed and implemented within 4 groups of 5-6 members each to ensure interaction and pair work.

The paper concludes with suggestions as how teachers can design listening and speaking tasks and encourage learners to experiment and innovate with the language through interactive listening activities with locally available material. Results proved that through well-planned interactive listening activities teachers can create a conducive atmosphere for learners and can develop their listening skill significantly. This will not only contribute to their self-confidence as speakers but also to their motivation to learn more.

INTRODUCTION

Listening skills are crucial for developing effective communication skills. It greatly influences the way one speaks. This means we tend to speak what we listen. This is also true of our mother tongue. All of us, as children, learnt our mother tongue the same way. A child learns to speak its mother tongue by listening to its mother's language; observes gestures and formulates vocabulary in a social context from those who live around it.Littlewood (1984) states that: "The child imitates the sounds and patterns which he hears around him." As it is a natural phenomenon or approach to Language learning, there is a strong relationship

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between listening (a receptive skill) and speaking (a productive skill). It is this co-relation which produces verbal expression. Listening is one of the four basic skills through which a language is taught. It is one of the two skills that we use when communicating orally. According to Rost (1991).However, he feels that in recent times listening is assuming greater importance in foreign language classrooms. By focusing more on the role of comprehensible input, second language acquisition research has given a major boost to listening.

As listening is fundamental to speaking, it is essential to recognise the mode of practice given to the learners in the class when teaching listening and speaking skills. Commenting on the existing coursebooks, Hill and Tomlinson(2003) suggest a list of listening activities that have potential for achieving rich intake of language, such as listening to short stories,extracts from novels, anecdotes, plays, news, documentaries and commentaries and poems and then engaging in discussions with peers on various topics. Such task-oriented activities provide learners with a reason to speak. While facilitating intake, interactive listening activities also provide opportunities to process the information in multidimensional ways. This process includes mental repetition of what is heard, connecting what is heard to life experiences and knowledge of the world and responding effectively. This helps in rich and relevant intake as well as retention of silent features of the input.

Barriers to Listening

Listening is the important skill which the learner has to develop as it goes a long way in language learning. However, this skill is not being given the attention that it deserves and is too often neglected in language teaching programmes according to Richards and Renandya(2002).

Teaching listening skill can be a difficult task for the problems associated with it are many and varied. Most EFL learners are introduced to English through the print medium. It, therefore, presents a serious barrier to listening comprehension for students who have learnt the language from written form or reading a book. Listening is a skill and it involves a process,unlike hearing which can be without volition. Hearing may be said to be physical process while listening is a cognitive process. A combination of factors involving the speaker,the listener and the environment help in the process of efficient listening. Therefore the impediments can be caused by anyone these factors.

The barriers to effective listening can be

1) Improper Encoding (Speaker-Oriented)
2) lack of interest or distractions (Listener-oriented)
3) Physical barriers (external factors).

Teacher's performance (speaking skills) and the material used to teach listening skill should be appropriate and need- based. The speaker should be clear and loud enough to be audible.

Other factors that can negatively affect a listening class are student's low motivation and lack of interest. If we want to develop listening and speaking that are complementary skills, it is the teachers' task to develop motivation and interest of the students. There is a close relationship between motivation andinterest. The teacher's performance and confidence are very important in teaching listening skill. A teacher should be able to sufficiently dominate what he/she has to teach and have a certain level of self-confidence to perform the class. There are teachers who do not have enough capacity to teach listening skills and this implies a low level of self-confidence on their part. Most of the time this problem exists because the teacher is not trained, or the training is not adequate to the level taught, or, even, he/she does not have enough practice in teaching this type of skills.

Problems sometimes begin when the classroom environment is inappropriate and/or the room's acoustics are bad. It is difficult to teach listening skill in a noisy environment. The noise inside the classroom normally happens when the teacher cannot control the class. Listening activities are hard to understand if the sound is not good. In most Engineering colleges, classrooms are normally large, so it is imperative for the teacher to be creative in adapting the classroom environment to his/her needs. Lab sessions are quite suitable for teaching all the language skills as the class is divided into smaller groups of 20 students each.

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Also, the lack of appropriate listening equipment whether audio, visual or audio-visual aids compounds the problem of providing students with an authentic listening experience. Further, when equipment is available it often does not work well.

The Objectives of the Study

The present study aims:

1. To decide what material and tasks can be useful and befitting to EFL Learners.
2. To design suitable interactive tasks that can provide rich and relevant input for effectively enhancing listening skills.
3. To develop collaborative strategies for learners that create interest and volition to learn the skill.
4. To investigate the impact of interactive activities on the developmentof listening skills.

Subjects and Materials

Although Telangana state has a good number of engineering colleges, 90 percent of students lack communication skills, Grammar skills, Presentation skills, and Soft-skills. Many of them do well in their academics and also score good percentage of marks. However, their problem remains with communication skills.They are often seen asking their English teacher "Sir/Mam, my spoken English is very poor. How can I improve my spoken English?" This is the question most of us (English teachers) are posed with.

So many answers are given to this question but to little avail. Even teachers sometimes were puzzled and were never satisfied with the answers they gave out to this reoccurring question. In order to prepare a satisfactory answer to the question "How can I improve my spoken English?" this study is carried out. One of the reputed minority Engineering colleges of Hyderabad i.e. Muffakahm Jah college of Engineering and technology, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad was selected. 20 students from different engineering branches(first year)were chosen as subjects.They were divided into groups of 4-5 members each. It is ensured that every group had students with different proficiency level (mixed-ability group).

Materials

Most of the professional colleges have set up a CALL Lab to cater to the communicative needs of EFL learners. There is a well-established CALL lab in our college. It uses mostly the software recommended by Osmania University such as Sky Pronunciation Suite, Ease, and live Action English. Although these software/modules focus on different aspects of spoken discourse of the language such as pronunciation, accent and intonation, I have always felt that students need more guidance in the use of these resources.

Therefore, a research is conducted on different groups of learners (engineering students who I know already use the Internet at home or college) to experiment with the use of different modules, e-learning and other useful language learning resources/websites easily accessible on internet in lab sessions as a way of promoting their listening and speaking skill.

Hypothesis

Listening materials which additionally incorporate other features of communication such as functionality of language, social and cultural norms and body language will result in enhanced learning outcome especially in the skills of Listening and Speaking.

Data collection and interpretation

1-Pre-listening test : This study involves two instruments for data collection. First, the aural-oral skills tests werecarried out to measure the actual levels of learners' performance. These testswere conducted twice in the form of pre-listening and post-listening. Second, a questionnaire was designed and administered to collect data, analyse the problems and invite suggestions on enhancing EFL learners' aural-oral skills through language labs facilities.

Both the questionnaire and the pre-listening test had been administered to the experimental group in the month of September 2016, before the participants underwent the designed interactive listening sessions or the program. The study documented the performance of the participants to compare it with their performance in the post-test to see if there is a significant progress or not.

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Pre-listening test -1

The following two IELTS tests are used to ascertain the actual level of the learners' performance.

IELTS Listening Part 1

In this part of the IELTS test, you listen to a dialogue and complete a form. Read the form carefully before you listen.

A new business owner enquires about courses. Listen to the conversation and complete each gap with no more than THREE words.

01:58 / 02:47

BUSINESS NATIONWIDE

Courses available:

Name of Course:	(0) *Getting Started*
Time:	Two hours from (1) [____]
Cost:	Free
Course Content:	Is starting a business right for me?
	Writing a (2) [____]
	Some legal issues
Nearest Location:	Handbridge
Next Course Date:	20th March

Name of Course:	(3) [____]
Length of course:	(4) [____]
Cost:	(5) [____] or £20 for recently unemployed
Course Content:	Day One: Legal Issues
	Day Two: Marketing and Pricing
	Day Three: Accounting and (6) [____]
Nearest Location:	Renton
Next Course Date:	5th March or (7) [____]

CALLER'S DETAILS

Name: (8) [____]

Address: (9) [____] , Eastleigh

email: (10) [____]

Pre-listening test-2

IELTS Listening Part2

In this part of the IELTS test, you listen to a radio programme and then answer 10 questions. Read the questions carefully before you listen. You should only listen to the audio once.

A radio listener is speaking to Brian, the conductor of a radio programme

00:56 / 02:01

1. Sarah lives near a ____ .   Correct
   - ○ tower
   - ○ dirty neighbourhood ✔
   - ○ market

2. She wants to _____ .   Correct
   - ○ propose
   - ○ persuade
   - ○ complain ✔

3. The residents on the estate are mostly _____ .   Incorrect.
   - ○ children
   - ○ workmen ✘
   - ○ retired

4. Citizens relax in a/an _____ .
   - ○ street market
   - ○ play centre
   - ○ open green space

5. As Sarah sees it, the council's project involves _____ .   Correct
   - ○ restoring
   - ○ re-using
   - ○ destroying ✔

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6. The Council's idea would benefit _____
. Incorrect.

○ children

○ their members ✗

○ pensioners

7. Members of the Council have _____ Sarah's requests. Correct

○ ignored ✔

○ accepted

○ welcomed

8. How far is the place Sarah suggests should be used instead? Not more than _____

[   ]
.

9. How should Sarah contact John Edwards? She should _____ at the council offices.

[   ]

10. What kind of person is Mr Edwards? He's good at _____ solutions. [   ]

Table (1) Total marks of the pre-listening test-1 and 2

Question #	Part-1		Total (%)	Part-2		Total (%)
	Correct Answers (%)	Incorrect Answers (%)		Correct Answers(%)	Incorrect Answers(%)	
1	44.25 %	55.75 %	100	43.22	56.78	100
2	46.97 %	53.03 %	100	45.06	54.94	100
3	42.6%	57.40 %	100	47.11	52.89	100
4	45.35%	54.65 %	100	41.08	58.92	100
5	45.20%	54.80 %	100	43.88	56.12	100
6	44.25 %	55.75 %	100	41.08	58.92	100
7	46.97 %	53.03 %	100	48.55	51.45	100
8	42.6%	57.40 %	100	47.89	52.11	100
9	45.35%	54.65 %	100	45.53	54.47	100
10	45.00%	55.00 %	100	43.55	56.45	100

The above table illustrates the results of the pre-listening tests of the experimental group. The responses showed that the total average of learners' correct answers was 45% while 55 % for incorrect answers. This suggests that the learners faced difficulties in listening and could not make out most of the elements during the listening test.

2-The questionnaire

It was administered to B.E.1styear students of three Engineering colleges in Hyderabad, viz. MJCET, DCET and Royal College of Engineering and technology, Hyderabad.

The questionnaire has questions on the following three sections and the questions were developed logically.

1. Identify the problems faced by the learners with regard to their Listening and speaking skills.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the SPS &Globarena in developing listening and speaking skills.
3. Invite suggestions so as to improve listening and speaking skills through CALL.

Identification of Learners' Problems in terms of maximum number of responses(learners' questionnaire)

No. of responses	Medium		Schooling		Rating of Listening skills			Rating of Speaking skills		
Total	English	Other	Rural	Urban	Poor	Ave.	Good	Poor	Ave.	Good
75	55	20	10	65	15	36	24	9	35	31

No. of responses	College Affiliation		Module used in CALL Lab		Usefulness of the Module in Teaching Phonetics			The relevance of Module to Functionality of language, social & cultural norms etc.		
Total	OU	JNTU	SPS	GBN	Poor	Ave.	Good	Yes	No	other
20	02	01	02	01	0	02	18	3	14	03

1.   Interpretation of Learners' Problems

Most respondents rate their listening skills as average.They feel **embarrassed** because they make lots of mistakes. While many of them are **not confident** about the use of language. Some can't communicate in real life situations because of their poor vocabulary. Few don't want to speak English until their English is much better.

Suggestions for improving Listening Skills

Most learners suggested that watching movies, news, speeches and documentaries will significantly help in developing the skill while some suggested that participating in interactive sessions such as G.D's, debates and Role-Plays would help. More the input better the output.

Suggestions for improving Speaking Skills

The majority suggested that one should communicate more often with classmates, teachers and good speakers to be fluent. Others suggested that participating in seminars listening to speeches and presentationswould help.

Interpretation of Teachers' views on problems and relevance of CALL Lab Material

In order to collect and interpret the Teachers' views on problems and relevance of CALL Lab Material, a questionnaire was administered to the Teachers handling B.E. 1st year English theory and lab sessions from three Engineering colleges in Hyderabad.viz. MJCET, DCET and Royal College of Engineering and technology.

The questionnaire has questions on the following three sections and the questions were developed logically.

- Identify the problems faced by Learners of B.E. &B.Tech. with regard to their listening and speaking skills.
- Evaluate the usefulness & relevance of the SPS and Globarena in developing listening and speaking skills.

- Invite suggestions so as to improve listening and speaking skills through

Identification of Learners' problems (Teachers' questionnaire)

Identification of the problems in terms of maximum no. of responses

Relevance of SPS and Globarena in Improving Pronunciation

- Is it helpful in enhancing Pronunciation and its different aspects? Yes=18
- Does it focus on functionality of language and vocabulary?, No=14

Problems faced while teaching Listening Skills

- No adequate material available =08
- Material lacks suitable tasks/exercises = 04
- Poor language skills and not confident about the use of language=07

Suggestions made for improving Listening Skills

- Designing suitable tasks/exercises for listening skills=05
- Listening to speeches, news channels etc.=04

Suggestions made for improving Speaking Skills

- Well-prepared communicative output activities based on functionality of the language can be planned in addition to phonetics=07
- Software should be suitable to the communicative needs of the non-native speakers. Exercises should also cover norms which are essential=05

2 Interpretation

Based on the data derived from both the learners' and teachers' questionnaires, the following interpretations are made:

Relevance of SPS and Globarena in Improving Pronunciation

Most teachers opined that SPS and Globarena are quite helpful in enhancing Pronunciation and its different aspects. However,

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most of them feel that they do not focus on the functionality ofthelanguage.

Problems faced while teaching Listening Skills

Most respondents say that firstly there is no adequate material available and secondly there is a need to design suitable tasks/exercises for enhancing listening and speaking skills

Teachers' Suggestions made for improving Listening Skills and speaking skills

Most teachers agreed that:

- Well-prepared communicative output activities such as G.Ds, role-plays, information gap exercises must be included in the CALL material
- Listening activities catering to the communicative needs of the learners should be chosen from the various sources available on the internet.
- Appropriate tasks/exercises should be designed to improve comprehension and communicative fluency in particular.
- These activities and tasks should not be limited to individual learners but to teams.
- A learner-centered approach helps students to develop a "can-do" attitude. It is effective, motivating and enjoyable
- Same activity to have tasks for enhancing both listening and speaking skills
- Learners should be encouraged to speak English inside and outsidetheclassroom and haveafree and meaningful conversation with classmates and teachers.

Based on the performance of the learners in pre-listening tests and the interpretations drawn from the questionnaires (learners and teachers) the following interactive listening activities were designed and used to develop aural skills of the EFL learners in the Interactive lab.

Strategies used for Developing Listening Skills

This listening activity is designed to provide the aural input that serves as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication.

It is ensured that these tasks include both top-down and bottom-up listening strategies to contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening input.

1) **Listen and ask questions**

Material used: pre-recorded video'Your body shapes who you are', TEDGlobal 2012, Speaker: Amy Cuddy

Time: 30 minutes

Pre-listening activity: A brief discussion about the how the body can change our mind and how the mind can change our body. Non-verbal communication forms the essential part of our communicative needs and also the syllabus. So, watch and listen carefully, take down notes from the subtitles, underline difficultand new words if any.

Post-Listening activity:

- Learners make groups of 4-5 members each.
- With the help of the notes taken, they discuss the topic thoroughly among themselves for 10-15 minutes so that they develop complete comprehension.
- The learners should be encouraged to use only the target language(English) during the discussion.
- Every team to set up three to four difficult questions.
- Every team to nominate a member who will answer the questions asked by the other teams.
- Every question carries marks- the team which answers all the questions correctly shall win.

2) **Listen and summarise**

Material used: pre-recorded audio 'the future of flying robots", TEDxPenn, April 2015, Speaker: Vijay Kumar

Time: 30 minutes

Pre-listening activity: A brief discussion about different kinds of robots and how they can fly autonomously to carry out different tasks for human beings. So, listen carefully, take down notes,understand the main idea, note down new words if any.

Post-Listening activity:

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- Learners make groups of 4-5 members each.
- With the help of the notes taken, they discuss the topic thoroughly among themselves for 10-15 minutes so that they develop complete comprehension.
- The learners should be encouraged to use only the target language (English) during the discussion.
- Individual members of the team are asked to present a summary of the talk.

3) **Listen and answer the questions**
Material used:practice set -1: listening items - multiple choice, PTE ACADEMIC
Pearson Test of English Academic
Time:05 minutes
Pre-listening activity: A brief discussion about skyscrapers and how they are built using different kinds of materials. Listen to the recording and answer the question by selecting all the correct responses. You will need to select more than one response.
Post-Listening activity:

- Learners sit in pairs.
- With the help of the notes taken, they discuss the topic thoroughly among themselves for 5-10 minutes.
- The learners should be encouraged to use only the target language (English) during the discussion.
- With mutual understanding, they should select the right option from the given options.

4) **Listen and fill in the blanks**
Material used: practice set -1: listening items- fill in the blanks, PTE ACADEMIC
Pearson Test of English Academic
Time: 05 minutes
Pre-listening activity: Listen to the conversation between a professor and a student. Listen carefully to the dialogues and type the missing words in each blank.
Post-Listening activity:

- Learners sit in pairs.
- Encourage to take notes.

- The learners should be encouraged to use only the target language (English) during the discussion.
- They should fill in the blanks collaboratively

5) **Listen and identify phonemes**
Material used: Sky Pronunciation Suite and English Pronunciation Dictionary(EPD)
Time: 30 minutes
Pre-listening activity: Discuss the all the 44 phonemes starting with vowels sounds first. Short and long vowels and diphthongs are to be written down along with the examples. Second they listen to all the consonant sounds and note them down with examples.
While-Listening Activity: During the listening process learners should listen to both individual sounds and to the sentences/words with those sounds. This can be ensured by asking them to listen and practice excercies from EPD along side SKY so that they are able to identify individual sounds and co-relate them with the words used in a sentence.
Post-Listening activity:

- They take different exercises for practicing short, long, diphthongs, consonants etc.
- To motivate learners their performance is evaluated and are awarded marks for every exercise on a scale of 1-10.
- Learn transcribing different words and stress marking
- Learners sit in pairs and with the help of notes taken they can be asked to transcribe monosyllabic words.
- Learners exchange their answers and can evaluate how others have done.
- Later they can check their answers with the teacher.
- Encouraging learners to say or articulate all these sounds individually and in pairs builds confindence and helps them overcome pronunciation difficulties such as MTI etc.

Results

Post oral test

The same pre-oral test was conducted again after the experimental group had undergone a training sessions of interactive listening activites for six monts.

Table (2) Total marks of the post-listening test test-1 and 2

Question #	Part-1		Total (%)	Part-2		Total (%)
	Correct Answers (%)	Incorrect Answers		Correct Answers(%)	Incorrect Answers(%)	
1	85.2	14.8	100	86.2	13.4	100
2	82.3	17.7	100	91.4	8.6	100
3	91.4	8.6	100	88.9	11.1	100
4	93.5	6.5	100	89.4	10.6	100
5	84.7	15.3	100	91.8	8.2	100
6	88.1	11.9	100	88.7	11.3	100
7	90.1	9.9	100	89.4	10.6	100
8	92.4	7.6	100	82.4	17.6	100
9	93.2	6.8	100	92.5	7.5	100
10	86.6	13.4	100	90.7	9.3	100

The table shows the total average of the correct and incorrect answers of the post-listening test taken by the experimental group. The responses showed that the average of learners' correct answers was 88% while the average of incorrect answers was 10%.

Upon comparision, it was ascertained that there was a significant difference between the results of Pre-listening and post-listening tests. The average of correct answers increased drastically while the average of wrong anwers went down.This provides a strong evidence that the use of interactive listening activities affects positively on the learners' of different listening skills elements. The result eventually validates the study's viewpoint by presenting positive variables towards the influence of interactive listening activities in developing listening skills. The results of the post-listening test revealed that interactive and task-based teaching of listening activities contribute to the development of the students' listening skills.

Therefore, the hypotheses that were set to answer the main study questions have been validated and confirmed.

Discussion

As is known, listening forms the basis of spoken English, it plays a crucial role in developing oral skills compared to other language learning skills.

A listening exercise may be done in class in several stages. But not all the listening tasks are learner centered. For Example Comprehension tasks or questions which follow the Listening activity help students understand the content better. But doing such tasks individually can make them feel isolated especially when they are unable to comprehend the conversation properly.

In an interactive and student-centered listening activity when comprehension tasks are done in pairs or in groups (4-5 members), learners are able to compare their answers, agree or disagree on some answers and a short discussion may follow where they will get all the answers and try to convince one another.

They can discuss and settle the arguments and also get answers for the missed questions, when the recording is played again. They can again compare their answers. Further discussion may ensue. The whole group gets to work and discusses the answers and can finally deal with any questions that come up. At the end of the activity, they feel much pleased because they are able to understand most or even all of the conversation. We can have pairs compare their answers to the listening tasks and follow with a group discussion about what they have listened to. Such an activity offers an opportunity to

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the learners to interact with one another which is the key component for language learning.

Conclusion

In this study the possible ways to teaching listenking skills have been discussed an analysed with regard to the problems faced by EFL learners. The primary step towards solving the problems is to identify them. Second is to consider these problems as challenges and find viable solutions. As most learners take listening skill for granted, they should be motivated to realize its strong co-relation with speaking skills. To motivate learners teachers can make use of various material available on internet in addition to the prescribed ones if any. If we are able to motivate our learners through need-based listening material followed by well designed interactive tasks, we may effectively contribute to make them effective listeners and consequently effective speakers.

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