

Teaching Listening and Speaking Skills is more a Talent than a Profession in ELT: a Decisive Revelation

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ABSTRACT

Of all the areas governing ELT, teaching listening and speaking skills remain the most admirable venture of an ESL teacher. This is mainly because of the risk factors that control this impressive job. An ESL learner does not require or even need not care for information from literature or linguistics, rather he/she is expected or forced to learn and experience the language in the way that befits his learning plan or condition. As such is the case, one cannot expect an esteemed professor holding rich literary background and proficiency to prove his expertise in the issue of teaching listening and speaking skills, unless he trains himself with a school of qualities and interests that attract and allow the learners to grow with these precious skills. In short, teaching listening skill is more of an attitude adjustment than anything else.

Listening is the most essential and fundamental skill to practise English language in all social and academic communications. Listening ability is a learning tool that offers unusual opportunities for broadening one's knowledge. When a person is listened to properly, he is likely to make an effort to speak in terms that the listener can understand. Good listening is one of the best ways for improving language facility. When people talk, they are usually affected by how one listens to them. An average ESL learner spends nearly half of his / her learning time in the act of listening. A teacher carries out much of the routine activity through spoken communication. The effectiveness of his/her communication depends on how best he is able to make the listener's listen. Indeed, many of the most important affairs in the world depend on listening. For example, a conference consists of people talking and listening to one another, but at any given moment in a conference there should be far more listening than talking. Here it is quite appropriate to quote the lines from Nichols and Stevens,

The justice we deal by jury is related to people's listening abilities. What does a jury do? It listens, sometimes to millions of words of testimony, and then makes up its combined mind about the case on trial. Also the way one votes in elections is affected by his ability to listen. (Nichols and Stevens, 275)

One should consider the nominal differences between hearing and listening. The difference between hearing and listening is that one is active while the other one is not. There is immediate

response if one is really listening. To be brief, hearing remains an involuntary physical process while listening becomes a voluntary mental process of perceiving. It is this distinction between hearing and listening that causes listening to be perceived as a unique skill to be developed on par with other skills of language learning. Underwood indicates, "Listening is the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear" (Underwood, 1990). Schneider writes,

True it is that our vocal instruments are of highest order. True it is that song and speech are of highest human achievements. We have been so busy developing these higher arts; we have forgotten the primary purposes of seeing and listening. Our ancestors survived in this world because they trained themselves to value the sounds their ears brought to them and the sights their eyes were able to perceive. Time and civilization have erased the need for keen hearing and accurate sight. It would be a mistake to think that these valuable aids to our enjoyment of life are to be used only for hearing music and viewing beautiful sights. It may well be that seeing and hearing are still of prime importance in our survival and work life. This is particularly true of hearing. We must learn to listen if we would hear (Schneider, et al.; 1975, p. 89)

Coming to ELT, teaching ESL is not a matter of prescriptions. It rather includes learner's strategies and methodology. This is much more with listening and speaking skills. Methodology can be characterized as the activities, tasks and experiences selected by the teacher in order to make teaching/learning a successful effort. Activities are justified according to the objectives the teacher has set out to accomplish and the content he or she has set out to reach. Teaching is usually regarded as something that teachers do in order to bring out changes in learners. As far as listening skill concerned, there always arises a question; to what extent the learners are consulted for the kinds of teaching and learning activities they will undertake. The kinds include: attentive listening, listening comprehension, skills and strategies for listening, the relationship between listening and speaking, methods of teaching listening and speaking, designing instructional materials for teaching listening and the basis of listening-speaking integration.

Brown (1994) states, "Listening is not a one way street. It is not merely the process of receiving audible symbols. The first step of listening comprehension is the psychomotor process of receiving sound waves through the ear and transmitting nerve impulses to the brain." According to Underwood,

Listening is a skill of understanding and assigning meaning by reacting, selecting, remembering, attending, analyzing and incorporating previous experience. The learners learn to listen in order to attend to what they hear, to process it, to understand it, to interpret it, to evaluate it and to respond to it. (Underwood, 1990)

Listening is a critical element in the competent language performance of ESL learners whether they are communicating at school, at work places, or in the community. Duzer says, "In one's daily life, listening is used nearly twice as much as speaking and four to five times as

much as reading and writing" (Duzer, 1997). Yet listening remains one of the last understood processes in language learning despite its critical role both in communication and in language acquisition. As language teaching has moved toward comprehension based approaches, listening to learn has become an important element in EFL/ESL classroom.

Listening cannot be separated from the expressive aspect of oral communication. "It is impossible to teach listening separately from speaking, or to set aside a portion of the instructional time for listening instruction and ignore it the rest of time" (Temple and Gillet, 1992). "Instruction in one facilitates learning in the other. Specific training in skills results in improvement of other abilities" (Anderson and Lapp, 1998). Basically it is a language skill, which facilitates first listening, then all the other skills. "Listening involves the simultaneous orchestration of skills in phonology, syntax, semantics and knowledge of structure.... all of which seem to be controlled by the same set of cognitive processes" (Hyslop and Bruce, p.1, 1988).

Anderson and Lapp recommend the following activities which may be put into practice in ESL classes in order to achieve the goals of effective listening:

1. Use selections with rhyming words
2. Have the key sentence occur in various positions.
3. Listen to selections. Students write fact or opinion. Discussion and reading to verify should follow.
4. List relevant details in one column and irrelevant in another.
5. Use various sentences and paragraphs. Students select type.
6. After listening, select and discuss words that could be used to reflect the same mood.
7. After listening, select and discuss words and phrases that were used to set mood.
8. a. Ask for the sequence of events for a paragraph heard. b.
Listen to a story and act out the story sequentially (possible with puppets)
9. Listen to descriptions of familiar people and determine the identities.
10. Use discussions on a topic followed by conclusions.
11. Use the tape recorder and reproductions of speeches.

(Anderson and Lapp, 1998, p.91)

Dealing with listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any ESL teacher/learner. This is because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. It is frustrating for students because there are no rules as in grammar. Speaking and writing also have very specific exercises that can lead to improve skills. This is not to say that there are not ways of improving listening skills; however they are difficult to quantify. It is emphasized that effective listening is even more important than speaking in ESL acquisition. In a conversation involving two persons, theoretically each person speaks fifty percent of the time but must listen hundred percent of the time. As more persons become involved in the

conversation, the less talking each does. However, in both cases one must listen all the time. Listening means monitoring one's own speech as well as paying attention when others are speaking. It is during the time of listening that one can add oneself to the language, thereby making it meaningful. This strengthens the ESL learning process.

This article also aims to highlight the practical issues and the discontents found on the track of teaching listening and speaking skills to ESL/EFL learners especially of poor backgrounds. It is generally found that the teachers who pose themselves to be experts in English language are not prepared to take up this task of teaching these inevitable basic skills to the learners; even if they do, they fail miserably in this subject, because teaching these skills calls for certain amount of extra risks and talents which cannot be defined in theoretical and scholarly terms. Murphy states, "Listening is a creative activity that cannot be analyzed and described" (Murphy, 1991). This could be the reason why there are plenty of professionals for teaching literature or linguistics, while there are only a handful number of teachers who can handle the subject of listening and speaking skills effectively and successfully. If the language educator remains unconcerned with these unspecified interests, the unfortunate learners will harvest only failures in their pursuit of language. If truth be told, teaching these skills is more a talent than a profession.

However, in this modern time, there are tools and gadgets introduced rampantly in the process of language acquisition. The electronic revolution has not spared the field of ESL/EFL teaching and learning. At the same time, though electronic gadgets seem to be a blessing, these man made commercial instruments can not bring out any wonder unless the trainer is talented meticulously and systematically. Here again the stress is given to the attitude of the trainer/teacher who has to put on show a lot of patience and commitment to the task for which a professorial approach is not inevitable.

Informal surveys reveal that many educational establishments are equipped with popular electronic gadgets including computer systems with wonderful software. Teachers assign the students sit before the systems to work out certain strange programmes. In such situations, the poor learner responds mechanically without understanding the aim of the task. Before the learner reaches the point of learning, he gets exhausted with these machines. He is even bored to enter the lab where he meets nothing but disappointment. Henceforth, the learner develops a sort of distaste for these electronic gadgets. Consequently, these electronic gadgets cause a great failure for the learner in getting hold of the language. However, it is to be admitted that the learners with rich language background don't suffer much in these situations. In all these cases, none but the language teacher is the sole owner of the responsibility for disappointing the ESL learner. In some institutions, the installation of electronics gadgets and language labs take place just for some commercial interest mainly on the part of the seller. Somehow the contractors take home the influences of the buyers and install their products. The sad truth is that very few teachers know how to handle the gadgets as they should be. The teacher who has least interest on handling these products is forced to train the learners with those products. This arrangement goes without any effect for a certain period and soon the place is web housed. In some cases, the companies manage to sell some software that works during their

demonstrations and ceases to respond later for the want of technical support. In a short run, the experts who installed the software disappear to untraceable corner or they switch over to other software programmes.

After analyzing these factors one is forced to conclude that the electronic gadgets should be least bothered or at least they should not be the core matter in ELT. The teacher should follow his/her own way of dealing with these gadgets with his/her potential talents and knowledge in the language so as to facilitate the learners kindling maximal confidence by his personal interests both on the skills and the ESL learner. The gadgets should be adjusted and arranged according to the taste of both the learner and the teacher. With a view to promoting the skills of listening and speaking of the learners, the syllabus designing authorities introduce some constructive programmes and design the curriculum accordingly. When a small change in the administration takes place, the whole system gets collapsed and the institutions pay least interest to the programmes introduced by the earlier authorities. As a result, the learners miss the longevity and continuity of the training they partially had.

The professionals who are not oriented in these skills cause adverse or reverse effect in ELT. Teachers without determined orientation cause havoc in this serious assignment. There is generally a lack of interest found on the part of the teachers, mainly because they are not prepared to exercise or apply extra efforts to accomplish their role. In many situations, professionals who have least knowledge in the field are assigned to deal this subject. This makes both the teachers and learners suffer dullness. Most of the teachers are not ready to take the risk of offering extra efforts to train the learners with novel applications as this job is not the one like explaining a lesson from a text book. Always text books offer a safe mode to keep the learners with in the control and confidence of the teacher.

Though there are good number of books on listening and speaking, these book materials do not make the learners feel comfortable in their level of learning. Very often, the contexts found in the texts books do not match with the learner's cultural area or background. Sometimes, the foreign texts and audio materials remain far reachable to the conditions of ESL learners. The learning of language needs skillful teaching with resources, materials and tools based on real life situations. In recent times, a lot of audio and video products are wide spread in the ESL sphere. Being attracted and expecting miracles the ESL learners rush to buy these commercial publications but soon they find that they get no profit in buying them. This situation again proves that the ESL learner fails in his attempt for the want of right type of ESL trainers who can really contribute to the cause of developing listening and speaking skills of the learners.

There are no teaching miracles waiting for teachers when they go shopping for ESL/EFL class. New technology can turn out to be a valuable resource or a disappointing one. Teachers should not let the novelty of technology replace the real purpose of ELT. That purpose should be decided by the ESL/EFL teachers, not by manufacturers or publishers of software. Learners benefit only when teachers are shrewd and competent judges of technology for ELT. Teaching or throwing some bits of theoretical information is an easy work that could be done by any teaching professional who could spend some hours of reading on the subject of his/her interest. But teaching the most precious skills of listening and speaking is really a difficult

mission for any ELT professional. If the teacher tries to accomplish the task without commitment and involvement, certainly frustration should be the crop both to the teacher and to the ESL learner. The teacher has to take certain physical and mental efforts to reach the learners by his personal interest in dealing with these remarkable skills and training the learners with determined efforts. Any ESL teacher who attempts to teach the listening and speaking skills has to remember that his job is not to establish any theory or standard in ELT class.

To conclude, the following tips may be taken into consideration by any ELT professional to promote the skills of listening and speaking in the ESL class of students who have poor or no backgrounds of language application. The teacher should be mentally and physically prepared for the job. He/she should be self-motivated to achieve the effect of his/her efforts. Any professorial approach should be kept aside. Learner's background and status should be seriously taken into consideration. One should not fully depend on electronic gadgets and computer systems. Monitoring the progress of the learners is all the more important than anything else in ELT. To crown it all, the ESL trainer needs to be creative and be ready for any attitude adjustment. The mission of teaching the skills of listening and speaking campaigns with an incredible proposition run by talented teachers who never pose professorial in the world of ELT.

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