

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMPREHENSION IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING (L2): LISTENING IN FOCUS

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Abstract

The central thesis of this paper is an empirical investigation of the significance comprehension in second language (L2) with a particular focus to listening skills. The paper adopts cognitivists' view of L2 learning, and embraces Long's (1996) Theory of Interaction Hypothesis. The theory is appropriate because it gives teachers, language experts, parents, learners, and peers freedom to repeat or correct errors found in L2 learners' discourses. The data for the study were collected from the texts of Government Girls Senior Secondary School, Giginyu, Nassarawa, in Kano State, Nigeria through active participation in teaching listening skills to the students of the aforementioned school. The researchers used pre- and post-tests results. In analysing the data for the study, t-test for independent sample was used to determine the effectiveness listening skill in L2 learning. The statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS version 16; the difference was accepted at p 0.05 level of confidence. The findings established that listening skill is a bedrock for effective L2 learning. Teachers, while teaching listening skill, should rekindle learners' background knowledge of the topic at hand; they should also introduce authentic materials that can make learners to compete with their peers at all levels.

Keys words: Comprehension, Listening skill, Second Language, and Learning

Introduction

As a means of communication and a threshold through which man sees beyond his physical world, language is a pivotal in man's life. It makes man a social being and places him over other creatures. It allows man to explore his environment and build relationships with other species; it is a container that captures man's dealings right from womb to tomb. It is also a passport of any given community as it only exists where is life (where human exits). Language, as a medium of communication calls for a versatility - ability for one to speak more than one language in order to function well in the dynamic society of today. Learning a second language is so important; it plays a speaker so high above their peers. It also comes with so many advantages - mobility across the globe, job opportunities, changes in educational policies, and participation to adjudge in myriad societal issues (Grabe 2009; Dan'Azumi & Koki 2022). These changes of social life necessitate other countries to introduce policies that make learning a second language compulsory to suit the ever changing world of today.

However, for a second language (L2 henceforth) to be learned comprehension skills are pivotal. Comprehension plays a role in the context of L2; it accelerates and enhances learners' performance. The ability to construct meanings both in oral and written discourse revolves around learners' comprehension power. As a hub of L2 learning, comprehension ability is also central to listening - it helps learners grasp speakers' talks. Sometimes, L2 listeners face a lot of challenges associated with comprehension. For example, alien resources - texts, environment and methods hampered seriously on the quality of learners' listening skill, because, unlike written texts where learners can mark sentences and paragraphs for decoding, in oral texts, unless recorded the texts are not permanent (Richards, 2009).

This paper approaches the domain of second language learning to explore the relevance of listening-comprehension in L2 setting. The

paper premises that comprehension of any given text either speech or written is based not only on simple decoding, but must be structured on background knowledge, setting, topic and attitude of learners. This position has proven that listening and comprehension are not passive or receptive skills; they are productive. Learners must labour hard to negotiate meanings using multiple interacting factors.

Behaviourists' Perspectives of Second Language Learning

Cognitivist view on second language learning as a complex mental process involving the coordination of many cognitive functions and systems. These perspectives emphasise the importance of understanding how learners process language input, store linguistic information, and use language output to convey meaning. One of the key cognitive theories, of language is the information processing model, which posits that learners process linguistic information through a series of stages, including attention, perception and memory. According to this model, the acquisition of a second language involves the automatic processing of linguistic information as learners gradually internalise linguistic patterns and rules (Luo, 2021).

Cognitive perspective also emphasises the role of attention and awareness in second language learning. Studies suggest that the learners who focus their attention and actively process language stimuli are more successful in acquiring the language skills. Some theories, such as the cognitive approach called Processability Theory, suggest that learners have an innate ability to process language at various levels, and that the progression of learners through specific stages of language acquisition is a natural process (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2020; Liu & Tsai, 2021).

Additionally, cognitive perspectives on L2 learning emphasises the importance of meta-linguistic awareness, or the ability to reflect on and manipulate language. Studies suggest that learners who are better at noticing linguistic features and patterns are more successful in

acquiring a second language. This is because they are able to identify and analyse the key features of the language setting up rules for themselves which they can apply in feature learning activities. Cognitive research on second language learning emphasises the role of motivation in second language. Learners who have a positive attitude towards learning and a strong motivation to learn are more likely to be successful in acquiring a second language (Roehr, 2009).

Concept of Listening

Listening, one of the four skills of language has been the most ignored skill on the basis that any normal human being is endowed with the ability to listen and comprehend discourses. Against this backdrop, in second language classroom, learners need to have good sense of listening ability to learn and grasp sounds and utterances of different natures for effective L2 learning to take place. Listening is a process of receiving what a speaker says. It involves negotiating of meanings through learners' active participation in a discourse. Renandya & Hu (2018) state that listening is a sine qua non for effective L2 learning that competence in all other skills shoulders around good skills of listening. It is a first skill that a learner ought to learn before proceeding onto other skills. Buttressing the point above, Bihari (2022) states that, listening is the most critical element in language learning; it is a key to speaking, and goes beyond reading and writing. Bihari's position substantiates the fact that listening is a threshold of second language; learners of second language must cultivate perceptive habits of listening. Sequel to the primacy of the skill, in recent years, scholars, theoreticians, teachers, and students have now accord a serious concern to the domain of listening (Yavuz and Celik, 2017).

Contrary to notions of classical linguists that listening is a passive skill that requires no coaching, or learners' visible attempts,

Anderson and Lynch (1988) establish that it is an active process which learners need to learn in order to negotiate the content of the interaction. This stance avers that listening is reciprocal – it requires listeners' participation. In the same vein, Richards (1987) states that though there are lots types of listening, active listening helps learners understand the context of speakers' talks. This explains the relevance of introducing practical strategies capable of making learners active listeners. In classroom, even in L2 setting, the skill of listening suffers negligence. Rost (2001) decries for the unfair treatments the skill of listening was subjected to. Rost adds that learners' competence is often judged by their ability to speak and write in the target language, while the other two skills (listening and reading) are termed secondary. A point worthy noting, is, listening skill proves dominant over other three skills. Because the success of teaching and learning whatever skill be it academic, formal or informal hinges around one's ability to listening. Empirical facts proved that those that have discernable listening ability learn faster, and outperform their peers in academic activities.

In recent years, listening occupies a prominent place in many language programmes. It is often taught as a stand-alone course or integrated with a speaking course. In addition, high-stakes tests (e.g. school leaving examinations, university admission tests and international standardized proficiency tests such as (IELTS and TOEFL) often include a listening component (Renandya and Hu 2018). In language teaching, listening refers to a complex process that allows individuals to understand spoken language (Rost, 2001).

Listening Skill in L2 Classroom

Listening, a one time a neglected skill, has now received global attention. It has become the focal point of researchers, practitioners and theoreticians. Second language researchers have now acknowledged the key role listening plays in language learning,

believing that exposure to the skill is an important requirement for learners' language development (Nunan 1997; Rost 2001; Field 2008; Richards 2009; Vandergrift and Goh 2012; Renandya and Hu 2018). Listening has now become a hub of second language learning – the success or otherwise of the process resolves around learners' potency to listening. Perceptible listening plays a crucial role in second language learning, it helps learners develop auditory discrimination, comprehension and pronunciation skills. It also exposes them to authentic texts and enhances understanding of intonation, rhythm, and various accents, contributing to overall language proficiency. Additionally, it facilitates vocabulary acquisition and improves overall communication skills, as it chances learners to perceive native or proficient speakers of the target language.

In second language classroom, teaching of listening, especially at the lower level should be introduced gradually – from simple to complex in order not befuddle the learning processes. Sontas and Graham (2018) explain that a successful teaching of listening skill involves skilful integration of bottom-up processes entailing attention to smaller components of what is heard (sounds, words, sentences) and top-down processes including activation and retrieval of prior knowledge about contextual features characterising the listening event. The point explains that teachers of listening should bring into classrooms resources that have bearing with learners' background knowledge. Background Knowledge, here, refers to knowledge and experience learners have about a topic at hand (Dan'Azumi and Koki, 2021).

However, while applying or bringing texts that capture learners' background knowledge, teacher should not do so randomly; it must be systematic. Macaro et al. (2007) found that random application of background knowledge sometimes hinder understanding, because, listeners draw conclusions based on expectations supported by world

knowledge even when what they hear does not match such expectations. Teachers of listening skills must stay abreast with new ways and resources relevant for teaching listening. Field (2008) and Siegel (2014) decried over teachers' dogmatic continuation of traditional methods while teaching listening to L2 learners. Some L2 teachers still use 'comprehension-based approach' – an approach in which learners are compelled to listen recordings and later on required to answer the questions as if they were taking a listening comprehension test (Renandya and Hu 2018).

Of course, with this approach, L2 learners find listening a quite complex skill. The complexity does not only affect lower level, but even those at advanced level are not exempted. Zeng (2007) reports that many L2 learners find it difficult to cope with the fast rate of connected speech, they complained for not even recognising words they already know in print, when listening to native speakers. As a result of inability to process spoken features (e.g. sound and sound blending, word boundaries in speech and complex grammatical structures) their ability to form a coherent representation of the meaning of the said text (connected speech) fails.

Some Factors Affecting Listening Skill in L2 Setting

- (i) Listening, like other skills of language is not free from within and outside challenges that militate against its proper conduct. In this regard, Derwing and Munso (2015) state that though linguistic factors play pivotal roles in influencing listening comprehension in second language learning. Some linguistic features, such as accents and variations in pronunciation, significantly impact a learner's ability to understand spoken language. If accent and pronunciation of the speakers prove so complex, learners' understanding gets affected. Brunfaut and Révész, (2015) explain that phonologically contracted forms (e.g., can't) potentially affects negative impact on decoding

auditory information, because the recognition of lexical items and syntactic constructions might pose a greater challenge due to decreased phonological information. Corroborating the point, Henrichsen (1984) conducts a research and found that the presence of reduced forms created greater difficulty for L2 learners than for first language (L1) listeners.

- (ii) Vocabulary is another factor affecting L2 listening. Nation (2006) states that there is an existing correlation between vocabulary size and listening proficiency. At the start, L2 learners have minimal size of vocabularies, which must affect their listening ability. However, is apparent that texts with more varied lexis cause more listening difficulty, because they require the listener to decode and process a greater quantity of distinct words. Indeed, Rupp, Garcia, and Jamieson (2001) and Revesz and Brunfaut (2013) found a significant association between lexical diversity and L2 listening success.
- (iii) Syntax, as a factor contributes to listening comprehension. A text free of syntactic complexity lends itself to so often to students. Field (2008) avers that syntactic structures guide the interpretation of spoken sentences. In the contrary, a text that has syntactic complexity proves more difficult to process. For example, Carpenter and Just (1975) propose that the presence of negative markers has a negative influence on sentence processing. Therefore, it would appear probable that listening texts that are more syntactically complex and/or contain more negative expressions will exert higher processing demands.
- (iv) Discourse type affects listening, while teaching listening to L2 learners teachers should introduce texts of less complexity. Buck (2001) states that Discourse-level features, such as discourse markers and cohesive devices influence the connection of ideas in connected speech. Brunfaut and Révész, (2015) confirm that cohesion determines listening difficulty, that the more cohesive a text, the easier to comprehend. A position worthy noting, here, is listening

passages with fewer causal verbs and particles tend to be more successful.

Methodology and Data Presentation

The data for the study were collected from the testes of students of Government Girls Senior Secondary School, Giginyu, Nassarawa, in Kano State, Nigeria. Students of SS II (A) were used as the respondents. However, pre- and post-test testing was employed, where the researchers conducted a test just before they could expose the students to any teaching. After the test session terminates, the researcher organised a class where the students were taught about listening skills and their relevance in understanding other skills of language. While the teaching session, the students were introduced to authentic texts, and their prior knowledge about the texts at hand were reactivated using lot of techniques. Afterward, the test follows, and the test was collected, marked and analysed. In analysing the derived data, a t-test for independent samples was used. The statistical analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16, and the difference was accepted at p 0.05 level of confidence.

Data Analysis

The table below presents the test mean scores L2 learners subjected to teaching of listening skills for better comprehension.

N	PRE-TEST Decision ($\bar{X}1$)	POST-TEST ($\bar{X}2$)	D	SD.	t-value	df	p-value
60	2.85	5.55	2.7	1.53	7.917	19.000	

The above indicates that the data were collected from the 60 respondents. It was then analysed using the t-test for Related Sampled in Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) Version 16. The result reveals that the mean score of post-test (5.55) exceeds the standard deviation of pre-test (2.85), with a mean difference of 2.7 and the

standard deviation of 1.53, calculated t-value of 7.917, 19 degree of freedom and p-value of .000. In line with this, it is pertinent to note, language teachers while teaching listening skills should in the matter of fact introduce learners to authentic texts which are produced by native speakers or those who possess near native proficiency. This helps learners to grow up with standard accents and pronunciation. Introducing them to these phonological resources will make their talks get international intelligibility when they speak at the international arena. Teachers and parents should endeavour to rekindle learners' prior knowledge, because, this knowledge is a foundation to comprehending new knowledge. A point worthy to note while reactivating students' prior knowledge, teachers must do it systematically, for mishandling the situation jeopardises understanding. Macaro et al. (2007) underpins that hybridised application sometimes endangers comprehension.

However, the materials to teach should also be considered – learners find pleasure in discourses that fit their levels. Teachers should bear in mind that students, particularly at lower level hate complex materials; they prefer materials of less syntactic and lexical complexity. Supporting the point above Field (2008) avers that syntactic structures guide the interpretation of spoken sentences.

Method of teaching is also a factor to consider while teaching listening in L2 setting. Though, there is no definite method for teaching listening to L2 learners. Scholar from the domain of education and applied linguistic called for eclectic method. Eclectic method allows teachers to employ two or more methods. The rationale behind the blinding is to allow the learners to participate in the class activities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper establishes that listening, one of the language skills proves central to other skills, because successful learning

the other skills resolves around it. It allows learners understand and perform better in all examinations, and it has proven that good listening ability does not confine to L2 learning alone, instead, it cut across all other domains. Those that have acute auditory input and output outperform their counterparts in all affective, cognitive, and psychomotor activities. The paper also foregrounds that L2 learning is more of stimulus response – learners must be guided by experts and be corrected whenever they deviate from the set conventions. Rewards either positive or negative await defaulters of the set conventions.

However, it premises teaching listening to L2 learners calls for blending of methods. Blending of methods allows both teachers and learners alike to shoulder teaching and learning activities proportionally. Again, the paper recognises the significance of introduce authentic materials align to learners' level and background knowledge. Introducing them to such materials maximise understanding and make them compete with other learners from other parts of the world.

Recommendations

On the basis of the conclusion above, the paper offers the following recommendations:

1. For successful L2 learning, teachers should pay priority to listening – it is a life wire to other skills. Good aural inputs allows learners to excel in other endeavours be it academic or nonacademic. Reports of empirical studies established those with good listening abilities outshined their peers in all activities. Listening ability goes with sense, and it causes respect to those own it.
2. In classroom setting, however, teachers should identify and assist learners with listening problems. Those learners need teachers' extra care, for they like to have more drills before they could be at the same parity with peers.

3. Authentic materials (teaching and learning aids) should be made available for listening activities. This would enable the learners to interact with the native speakers of the target language, and makes them compete with other learners from all parts of the world.

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