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Teaching L2 Listening in EFL Large Classes of Mixed-Ability University Students

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Abstract: This paper attempts to summarize what is known about the nature and process of listening. It also tries to relate theoretical issues to classrooms practices. Teaching L2 listening in EFL large classes is not a passive process but an active one which assists students construct meaning in their mind. The paper then introduces listening types and different strategies that teachers can select to suit their listening teaching at language schools in general and in university in particular in which activities viewed from top-down, bottom-up, and interactive approaches are recommended. The paper focuses on activities and strategies such as lecturing, teacher talks and student talks that mainly occur at university settings. Web-based resources, online listening training with technology, and online assessment tools are also introduced. The paper ends with limitations and conclusion that encourage teachers and educators to further investigate related issues of this listening topic.

Keywords: Listening, Large Classes, Mixed-Ability Classes, Teaching Listening in Large EFL Classes, Teaching L2 Listening in Mixed-Ability Classes

About the Authors

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1. Introduction

Teaching second language listening in EFL classes is different from teaching listening in the first language, especially when teaching in large classes, and the definition of 'large classes' varies enormously according to different cultures of different countries. For instance, in Western countries, a teacher says he has a large class if he enters a classroom of twenty students or even less. However, such 'large classes' are considered 'medium-size' in Asia or in developing countries. Nguyen (2015) and Huang Rui (2015) state such classes are considered large when the number of students come up to 40 to 60 students, even in ESP or General English classes, there are over 100 students attending these courses (Kakar & Sarwari, 2021). Large classes of mixed-ability students can be counted up to over '75 students to have class together' (Huang Rui 2015), therefore, professors can face lecturing in "very large classes of more than 100 students" (Hansen & Christine, 1994). Perhaps there are advantages and disadvantages when teaching in large classes, yet novice instructors may face difficulties in terms of class management and instructional effectiveness. In this article, I will focus on how to teach listening effectively using web-based resources available which teachers can make use of when facing lack of books and/or teaching materials for their listening teaching. I will also introduce different listening types and different listening strategies that teachers can select to teach large

classes. The paper introduces strategies to teach listening to large groups of university students of mixed abilities focusing on lecturing, encouraging teachers use their real 'teacher talks' and 'student talks' as teaching resources for their classes. The paper ends with recommendations on self-assessment that teachers should encourage students to use to evaluate their learning progress in their personalized or autonomous listening development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching Listening Skills

Listening is one of the most important skills in communication, particularly when students attend a college or a university. Students have to listen to academic lectures, take notes, and communicate with peers and professors. However, it seems studies on listening are neglected (Canh, 1999; Wright, 2002; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004; Thinh, 2006; Van, 2007; Nguyen, 2020). Only recently this skill has received great attention of scholars, teachers and educators. Researchers and language educators state that listening is 'an extraordinarily complex activity that requires many different types of knowledge and processes that interact with each other' (Nemtchinova 2013). Perhaps there are reasons that caused such low proficiency of students' ability in listening comprehension (Nguyen, 2020; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). The concern is how language teachers can teach effectively to produce good results in listening for their targeted students.

2.2 Understanding Listening as An Active Process, not a Passive Process

When teaching listening, some teachers tend to turn on CDs, DVCs or videos, and let students sit quietly listen to spoken messages (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Nemtchinova 2013; Nguyen, 2020). They make listening to become a passive process. It seems teachers think listening is a passive process. In fact, when students listen, they interpret the incoming sounds and pick up important words from the flow of speech to construct meaning. Students have to predict and use background knowledge as well as listening strategies to interpret the information. In case of being required to ask questions or give answers to teachers or peers, students need to prepare responses for teacher-student or student-student interactions. These processes happen 'simultaneously in the listener's mind and interrelated with each other.' (Nemtchinova 2013). Listeners work harder when a spoken message enters the short-term memory. Brain has to distinguish information from other noises, group meaningful words. Then the comprehended information will be retained in the long-term memory (Vandergrift & Goh, 2009; Nemtchinova, 2013; Nguyen, 2020). Three dimensions including speech recognition, the brain, and working memory are included in listening cognition. Equally important is the social dimension (e.g. gestures, body language, non-verbal signals) that happens in interactions which allow students to respond to teachers' lectures and/or questions, participate in peer discussions and conversations, predict speakers' implied meaning or intention for socially-appropriate responses in social situations (Vandergrift & Goh, 2009).

2.3 EFL Large Classes of Mixed-Ability Students

Teachers, especially in developing countries or in the EFL contexts, often find themselves in situations in which they have to face large classes/EFL large classes with students of mix abilities (Ur 1984; Le et al., 2016). As schools did not hold placement tests, even they did, and due to financial reasons (Nguyen 2015), classes in these EFL academic settings still possess large and multi-level students. High-proficiency and low-proficiency students exist in the same class. The problem is how to teach second language listening effectively in such large classes of multi-language proficiency levels.

2.4 Understanding Listening Approaches

2.4.1 Bottom-up Processing

Bottom-up processing or language-based processing helps students recognize lexical and pronunciation features to understand the spoken text. This process focuses on language-based exercise including recognition of individual sounds, word boundaries, stress, contractions, connected speeches, and thought groups (Vandergrift, 1997; Nemtchinova 2013; Nguyen 2020).

2.4.2 Top-down processing

Top-down processing or meaning-based processing includes listening for main ideas/gist, guessing topics or settings of the spoken messages, listening for specific information. This process requires language learners to use their prior knowledge and experience to construct the meaning of the listening text using the information provided by sounds and words (Nemtchinova, 2013; Nguyen, 2020). This process uses prediction, guessing and inferencing to perform the required listening tasks.

2.4.3 Interactive Approach

Skilled listeners, however, can engage both bottom-up and top-down processing in their listening comprehension to spoken message. They use these types of processing to construct meaning (Richards & Burns, 2012; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Nemtchinova, 2013; Nguyen, 2020) although educators often use these skills separately due to their different listening focus (Nemtchinova 2013).

3. Selecting Appropriate Listening Types and Listening Strategies

3.1 Types of listening

Selecting appropriate types of activities to teach listening is important. There are many types of listening that listening teachers can choose which can best suit their listening classes. Rost (2011) classified listening exercises as:

- *Intensive listening:* listen to single out words or phrases, grammatical structures, specific sounds, or intonation patterns.

- *Selective listening:* concentrating on specific details with a deliberate purpose in mind.

- *Interactive listening:* Interactive listening requires the listener to participate in the conversation by alternating between listening and speaking.

- *Extensive listening:* Extensive listening focuses on general comprehension of the text. It means getting the overall meaning and enjoying the content rather than seeking answers to specific questions.

- *Responsive listening:* Responsive listening makes the listener relate to the content of the text by expressing an opinion, a feeling, or a point of view.

- *Autonomous listening:* Autonomous listening describes any independent listening that is done outside the classroom. It promotes learner motivation and self-reliance (see Nemtchinova 2013; Ross 2011).

3.2 Selecting Appropriate Listening Strategies

Students should be taught how to choose appropriate listening strategies to cope with listening tasks or listening assignments. Mendelsohn (1994), Flowerdew and Miller (2005), Vandergrift & Goh (2012) suggested useful listening strategies that teachers can apply, depending on cognitive, metacognitive, or socio-affective categories:

- *Cognitive strategies*: include prediction and word guessing from contexts.

- *Metacognitive strategies*: include thinking about listening, facilitating listening planning, monitoring, evaluating and reflecting on the listening process. For instance, students are asked to give the main idea/main gist after listening to a spoken message.

- *Socio-affective strategies*: involve communicating with teachers, classmates, and native speakers, as well as developing self-confidence and motivation. For example, when students check answers in groups or seek additional practice opportunities, they use socio-affective strategies (Nemtchinova 2013).

However, as the setting here is a university setting, teachers should choose listening types that suit university settings.

3.2.1 Teaching Students Listen to Academic Lectures

Lecturing is considered an old style of teaching. However, as university classes are large, especially combined classes, university professors tend to use lecturing as the main method to transfer knowledge to students. At tertiary level, lecture attendants use the top-down approach of listening comprehension to understand the spoken messages delivered to them. In order to understand academic lectures, students need background knowledge, because if their 'background subject knowledge was weak, they could not understand basic subject content although most parts of the lesson lectures should not have been new.' (Trinant & Nguyen 2017). Therefore, professors need to provide materials in advance to lecture listeners, or students need to read, find information related to the lectures before attending class in order to understand the information given later by lecturers. Handouts can be delivered to listeners in advance, especially if students are low English-proficiency achievers. Note taking skills, discourse structures of lectures, and listening to gist instead of all details of the lectures should also be taught to lecture listeners. These skills need practice when students listen to real lectures (Richards & Burns 2012). Before listening to a real academic lecture that usually runs over two hours, language learners should be given practices to small talks by teachers or peers first to gain experiences in listening to academic lectures.

3.2.2 Teaching Students Listen to Teacher Talks

Real academic lectures usually last long, at least one hour in one session. Teachers should prepare 'teacher talks' by:

- Record their colleagues' talks;

- Cutting other teachers' academic lectures in short 15-minute talks;

- Record their own voices on topics related to academic lessons delivered later, and allow students to listen to this recording;

- Using short part of a real lecture available online/from YouTube channel;

Teacher talks should not last long, aiming to train listeners skills in listening to academic lecture: note-taking, prediction, gist, listen to specific information, sequencing, and topic identification. These areas are the key areas of academic listening a university student has to master to listen to real lectures delivered later in his student's academic life. By listening to these designed materials, the listener will get used to listening real academic lectures in classroom. Teachers should clearly tell the purpose of the talks, set time length, ask questions that students need to answer individually or in group after listening to teacher talks (see: Electronic Supplementary Information ESI).

3.2.3 Teaching Students Listen to Peer Talks

This source of aural input is taken from student-student' s interactions. Teachers work as facilitators in student talks and have students talk in pair. Peer talks can be a good authentic source of listening for teachers to have them recorded. This kind of activity will encourage even shy language learners to participate in their peer talks. Perhaps not all peer talks are recorded as some talks might be in poor language input, but peer talks prove to be quite natural classroom input that listening teachers can make use of (Nemtchinova 2013).

3.2.4 Teaching Students to Listen to Group or Class Discussions

If students have been trained to listen to Teacher Talks and Peer Talks, students at this stage are retrained to practice how to listen to their class discussions or group discussions. Teachers give an interesting topic and divide a large class of mix-ability students into small active groups. Allow students to choose their peers in groups so they feel easy to talk with. Time length of each discussion should also be set. Class or group discussions from students should be recorded by smartphones with voice or video modes, preferably video discussions. Later these videos will be used to be inserted comments or feedback on students' mistakes in their spoken English or techniques of public speaking.

3.2.5 Autonomous Listening/Personalized Listening

Students are encouraged to do autonomous or personalized listening outside classroom. Autonomous listening helps build learners self-confidence, self-motivation, self-monitoring, and research skills when they search materials for their own listening practices. Autonomous listening also trains language listeners how to cope with listening tasks on their own, even they will learn how to select strategies and self-assessment techniques to evaluate their listening process (Nemtchinova 2013). For autonomous listening, students can choose all types of listening with listening activities they feel like doing. Some researchers named autonomous listening extensive listening but I think autonomous listening or personalized listening has a clearer idea that extensive listening as extensive listening can be confused with this type of listening that have mentioned in 4.1 section above.

4. Making Full Use of Listening Resources

4.1 Teaching Listening with Technology

Technology has helped teachers much in their language education, particularly in listening. Making full use of listening resources available online can help teachers save time, save energy, and save money in finding materials and resources for their classroom teaching. Here are some selected web-based resources which assisted teachers in teaching listening proven much useful by researchers.

Language teachers have been using technology to teach listening in classroom and outside of the classroom for a long period. They have used audio to video materials and web-based/Internet-based materials, authentic resources to help improve students in comprehending and acquiring language listening skills. As the topic of this paper focuses on listening improvement at tertiary settings, the following technology devices are recommended to assist university improve their top-down listening skills:

Audio and video technologies that expose students to different kinds of voices, accents, situations, to diverse and rich cultural contents if possible, at low cost or free of charge. Using these technologies can save teachers' energy and voice as audio/video devices can be paused and replayed may times as expected. As Vandergrift and Goh (2012) maintain that listeners can only improve their listening skills if they can control over their listening. If students control their listening, that means they can interact with the text and the task, construct meaning based on their schemata, being able to switch between the bottom-up and top-down processing, employing a variety of strategies and skills, and discussing their effectiveness with their classmates. Students can 'rely on metacognitive abilities to overcome difficulties and seek additional opportunities to listen outside of class. By actively attending to their listening needs, learners improve performance in listening and learning the second language.' (Nemtchinova 2013). In this case, audio/video materials available online can help. Following is a list of audio and video materials listening teachers can make full use of:

- Audio materials:

    audio books, CDs from textbooks

    radio programmes (BBC, VOA)

- Video materials:

    BBC TV, CNN TV, ABC TV.

Academic lectures: ITunes University, Academic Earth, MIT Open Courseware, commercials, documentaries, feature films, and educational videos from YouTube video channel.

4.2 Web-Based Listening Materials

Depending on learners' academic levels in listening, teachers can select appropriate materials to teach them listening skills. To train students in pronunciation and English sounds, a top-down approach in listening should be used. On the other hand, in order to train students to listen to real-life conversations or academic lectures/talks, a bottom-up approach is recommended. Web-based listening materials that university students can use are various:

For a top-down approach listening teaching:

- BBC Pronunciation Training

- EnglishCentral

    For a bottom-up approach listening teaching:

- Elllo.org

- YouTube Videos

- MIT Open Courseware

- Academic Earth

- ITunes University

4.3 Creating Teachers' Own Materials

Language teachers can create their own materials for their students' practice. The following devices and materials that listening teachers can use:

- audio and video recorders

- language labs

- audio-recording and editing software (e.g., Audacity, Windows Movie Maker)

- online communication tools (e.g., Skype, Windows Messenger, Google Video Chat, Zoom, and Zalo)

- mobile phones, voicemail, and online voice-recording tools.

5. Assessments

Assessment refers to collecting information about learner's language ability or achievement. Of course, in teaching listening to university classes, assessment can serve many purposes. Listening placement tests can help schools enroll students, to identify students' needs, a diagnosis listening test can be applied, or to access students' listening progress or achievement, teachers can design a formative evaluation or summative evaluation test in listening skills (Richards & Burns 2012). At tertiary level, students are required to listen to lectures, discussions, debates, seminars, workshops or conferences. Therefore, assessment should focus on meaning-based approach instead of language-based approach to listen to individual sounds or individual words. At university, listening assessment should be based on a more interactive approach in which students listen to recognize meaning in context from real-life or authentic messages.

Assessment should not be done only at the end of the course. It should be staged in three phases:

- At the beginning of the course, to find out difficulties students may have with their listening abilities.

- At the middle of the course, to assess listening activities and techniques teachers have used in class.

- At the end of the course, to know how much progress students have made (Richards & Burns 2012).

5.1 Assessment on What Students Have Learned

Listening is a very complex process which requires students to perform many tasks at the same time. Therefore, to concretely measure students' progress in listening, teachers first need to assess what students have learned in class. If a listening test is different from what students have learned, 'it can be very disconcerting for students.' (Richards & Burn 2012).

5.2 Assessment on Meaningful Contexts

Listening testing should be done in different phases to evaluate listeners' progress in this skill as listening practice involves a process of skill improvement. Listening assessment should test listening skills students will need to use in real-life world instead of testing rules of grammar and sentence organization (Richards & Burns 2012). At tertiary level, students should be trained and tested listening skills to listen lectures, discussions and debates, using listening in their real academic settings such as listening skills used when communicating with faculty administrators, interacting with peers, faculty staff members, dormitory management members, and school canteen workers. These are real-life situations students need listening skills to survive and succeed in their academic settings.

5.3 Encouraging Students' Self-Assessment

Limited listening teaching hours cannot cover everything in classroom. Thus, students of listening teaching should be encouraged to perform their self-assessment regularly to adjust their learning errors, assess their listening progress. Teachers can help students reflect their learning, encourage them to become independent learners in listening. Useful websites and materials and books on authentic listening should be frequently updated in teachers' listening development lists. Students' self-assessment (see EIS) will be motivated in many different ways as teachers encourage students to set goals to achieve in one particular setting (Richards & Burns 2012).

5.4 Assessment Tools

5.4.1 Online Assessment

Making full use of resources for online assessment can save teachers time and effort designing tools to evaluate students' progress in listening. The following websites have been designed to assist language learners assess their own listening skills:

- Cambridge English Language Assessment (go to 'listening')

- ExamEnglish.com (https://www.examenglish.com/TOEFL/toefl_listening.htm)

- Elllo.org (https://www.elllo.org/)

- Englishteststore.net (go to 'short talks and lectures')

- Dailydictation (https://dailydictation.com/courses/ielts-listening)

With the help of technology, now students can select either audio or even video materials to evaluate how much progress they have made before, during, or after their listening training.

5.5 Constructing A Listening Lesson Plan: Three Stages

5.5.1 The Pre-Listening Stage

The pre-listening stage (see **ESI**) is the first stage of a listening process in which activities like activating students' vocabulary and background knowledge on a given topic are designed. Students' background knowledge of the topic will help students understand a speaker's ideas, predict what the speaker will talk about. Pre-listening activities if well designed will build up students' confidence, arose students' curiosity and motivate them for listening to academic lectures (Ross, 2011; Nemtchinova, 2013). Some examples of pre-listening activities include:

- allowing students to predict the content of the topic by revealing the topic title, key words

- brainstorming vocabulary related to the topic

- providing comprehension questions and allowing students to discuss the lecture beforehand

- providing a written text closely related to the lecture/talk, allowing students discuss ideas and learn about new vocabulary terms

- providing background information on the text

• discussing images related to the lecture or the talk.

5.5.2 The While-Listening Stage

This process is considered 'the most important part of a listening lesson.' (Richards & Burns 2012). Students have to process spoken texts for meaning. This part requires listeners to use different listening strategies to successfully perform their complicated listening tasks. Listening teachers can use a variety of tasks to target listening sub-skills including activities that focus on the *word level*, *main idea*, *details*, and *prediction* (Nemtchinova 2013). Because at this stage, students are asked to listen and sometimes write notes, especially when they have to listen to lectures, listening tasks and task instructions designed should be clear, brief, and listening activities should be focused as students at the while-listening use their short-term memory to perform the listening tasks. Listening tests or listening tasks should be given with multiple choices to avoid students have to do listening tasks and writing tasks at the same time more easily since writing and listening simultaneously may cause difficulty to students (Mendelsohn, 1998). But if listeners have to listen and write down notes or answers, students should be given extra time to double check what they have written down as IELTS listening tests do.

5.5.3 The Post-Listening Stage

Post-listening activities is a last stage of a listening lesson or an academic lecture. It gives students a good chance to:

- review vocabulary they have learned

- refine their listening comprehension

- discuss ideas and learn more about the topic

- develop their oral or written skills

- re-evaluate their listening skills and listening strategies.

Activities can be various, depending on learners' levels ranging from role-playing and acting out simulations, building creative stories based on the contents of the spoken information, analyzing tone of spoken message, emotion expressed by the speaker/lecturer, summarizing/paraphrasing the text.

6. Limitations and Conclusion

Teaching listening is a complex and challenging process as the process of making meaning happens secretly in the student's mind that cannot be observed. However, if listening teachers understand the listening processes, selecting appropriate types and strategies of listening, using good resources, language learners can improve and listen to spoken messages effectively. Further research on listening domain should be implemented with in-depth analysis and discussion opening wide doors to learners' autonomous listening development.

Although the author of this article tries his best to provide insights and steps of teaching listening to university students, limitations are not avoidable. Different teachers of different settings can have different voices and different selections for their students' listening practices. Resources and tools used for teaching listening recommended in this article may not meet teachers' and/or students' needs located in one particular school, however, ideas of choosing materials and resources for listening teaching recommended can be applied creatively by teachers in other academic settings.

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Yes.

Conflict of interest
The Author has no conflicts of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.