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TEACHING LISTENING: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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Annotation: Listening skills are essential for learning languages since they enable students to acquire insights and information, and to achieve success in communicating with others. Life within and outside classroom offers many listening opportunities, but some students fail to seize them because they may concentrate on what they want to say themselves rather than on what a speaker is saying. Listening can be crucial in some situations and it is important that EFL learners develop their listening skills. The aim of this article is to highlight the problems that may interfere with listening comprehension and to suggest some solutions to them. To facilitate listening tasks and improve the learners' listening skills the teachers should enhance their positive attitude, train them to be responsive and listen for the speaker's purpose, evaluate the supporting materials and look for non-verbal clues. But if the teacher provides the students with suitable listening materials, background and linguistic knowledge, it will enable them to develop their listening skills and help with EFL comprehension and acquisition.

Key words: accurate hearing, listening stages, top-down processing skills, bottom-up processing skills, feedback, listening activities, language comprehension/ acquisition.

It is well-known that English is Lingua Franca of our days. Everyone needs to learn the English language in order to get in touch on an international level. Speaking English helps us to communicate with people from countries all over the world as it is the language of politics and diplomacy, science and technology, business and trade. In fact, as it is so dominant in international communication, we find more information regarding nearly every subject if we can speak this language. Communication requires integration of all language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing, of which listening is of primary importance as it is one of the fundamental skills in language acquisition. It's no wonder that in recent years the language teaching profession has placed a concentrated emphasis on listening, as it is considered to be a major component in language learning and teaching. Naturally, there are obstacles that make listening, which is a general purpose in most learning situations, difficult, as it is more than merely hearing words. Listening is a complex process in which the listener takes the incoming data, an acoustic signal, and interprets it based on a wide variety of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge", i.e. listening is the ability to

identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary, and grasping his meaning. An effective listener is capable of doing these four things, but a beginner finds it very difficult as he/ she can have no control over the structural and lexical range of the speaker to whom he/she is listening. Nevertheless, any listener can learn to focus on significant content items if he/she learns to listen selectively. In listening comprehension, a good listener will not listen to all the words of the listening task. They may skip any part of it and just focus on the information that they need for their answer. Listening word by word or listening for detail, as they think, is very important to get the main idea. Once they try to comprehend every single word, there is little chance for them to discover the key words which give them clues to understand the listening texts. In our first language, we skim over parts of the message and pay attention to relevant parts only. Thus sentences are not processed word by word and the focus is placed on the ideas behind these words and how these ideas are linked together to draw conclusions Some teachers think that listening is the easiest skill to teach, whereas most students think it is the most difficult to improve.

The listening process is divided into 3 stages: 1) pre – listening where the context is established. The teacher creates motivation and students do some activities with the purpose of preparing them for what they will hear; 2) in – while listening, where learners do the mentioned tasks or find answers. There are two kinds of material and procedure. On the one hand, extensive reading helps students to acquire vocabulary and grammar and it usually takes place outside the classroom. They do it for pleasure, so that their knowledge of the language improves and it makes students better readers. On the other hand, intensive listening is what students usually learn in the classroom, through activities such as answering questions, following a route on a map, making notes, etc. 3) post – listening, the part where students have the opportunity to check their answers about they have been listening to, to give feedback and consolidate what they have learnt. It is useful for teachers because it helps to analyze particular difficulties the students could have with listening activity. Difficulties of listening in language teaching. A great number of students believe that listening is the most difficult skill and they start to panic when they hear the word "listening". But on the other hand students, who learn from what they hear, usually achieve better results at listening. Underwood argues that students whose mother tongue contains similar or the same intonation and stress pattern have fewer problems in comparison with students whose mother tongue is based on different rhythms . The first thing that learners have to develop is an ability that will enable them to identify the topic of the conversation and help them to find a relevant reaction. Secondly, learners should also develop an ability to predict the development of the topic as this ability will help them to prepare a suitable response in advance. Thirdly, they ought

to recognize and also indicate when they do not understand enough to make a relevant response. Learners have to learn how to cope with problems of the topic clarification by using expressions such as "excuse me", "pardon" or "Sorry, I do not understand" or simply by repeating the speaker's words to show that they are having problems. Foreign language learners need to pay special attention to a number of special characteristics of spoken language, because they strongly influence the processing of speech, and can even block the comprehension if they are not attended to. In other words, they can make the listening process difficult. These factors are: Clustering. In written language we are conditioned to attend to the sentences as the basic unit of organization. In spoken language, due to memory limitations, we need to help students to pick out manageable clusters of words; sometimes foreign language learners will try to retain overly long constituents (a whole sentence or even several sentences), or they will err in the other direction in trying to attend to every word in an utterance. Redundancy. Spoken language, unlike most written languages, has a good deal of redundancy. When we're in a conversation, we can notice the rephrasing, repetitions, elaborations, and little insertions of "I mean" and " you know". Such redundancy helps the hearer to process meaning by offering more time and extra information. Learners can train themselves to profit from such redundancy by first becoming aware that not every new sentence or phrase will necessarily contain new information and by looking for the signals of redundancy. Performance variables. In spoken language, except for planned discourse (speeches, lectures, etc.), hesitations, false starts, pauses, and corrections are common, whereas they can easily interfere with comprehension in foreign language learners. Colloquial language learners who have been exposed to standard written English and/or textbook language sometimes find it surprising and difficult to deal with colloquial language which appears in both monologues and dialogues. Rate of delivery. Every language learner initially thinks that native speakers speak too fast! Actually, the number and length of pauses used by a speaker is more crucial to comprehension than sheer speed. Stress, rhythm, and intonation. The prosodic features of the English language are very important for comprehension. As English is a stress-timed language, English speech can be a terror for some learners as mouthfuls of syllables come spilling out between stress points. Also, intonation patterns are very significant not just for interpreting straightforward elements such as questions, statements, and emphasis but for understanding more subtle messages like sarcasm, endearment, insult, solicitation, praise, etc. Interaction. Unless a language learner's objective is exclusively to master some specialized skill like monitoring radio broadcasts or attending lectures, interaction will play a large role in listening comprehension. Students need to understand that good listeners (in conversation) are good responders. They know how to negotiate meaning (to give feedback, to ask for clarification, to maintain a topic) so

that the process of comprehending can be complete rather than be interrupted by insufficient interaction. Each of the above aspects makes listening difficult and not all the students can cope with it. The teacher should help them by making this work easier and more interesting. He/she can help students become effective listeners by making them aware of the different kinds of listening, the different purposes for listening, and the qualities of good listeners . This is possible on condition that the teacher will take into consideration the factors which can ensure success in developing students' skills in listening: linguistic material for listening; the content of the material suggested for listening and comprehension; conditions in which the material is presented. Comprehension of the text by the ear can be ensured when the teacher uses the material which has already been assimilated by students. However this does not completely eliminate the difficulties in listening. Students need practice in listening and comprehension in the target language to be able to overcome three kinds of difficulties: phonetic, lexical, and grammatical. Phonetic difficulties appear because the phonic systems of English and Armenian differ greatly. The hearer often interprets the sounds of a foreign language as if they were of his own language which usually results in misunderstanding. Lexical difficulties are closely connected with the phonetic ones. Students often misunderstand words because they hear them wrong. For example: There is a ship. There is a sheep. It is a worm. It is warm. Grammatical difficulties are mostly connected with the analytic structure of the English language, and with the extensive use of infinitive and participle constructions. Besides, English is rich in grammatical homonyms, for example: to work-work; to answer-answer; -ed as the suffix of the Past Indefinite and the Past Participle. This is difficult for students when they aud. The content of the material also influences comprehension. The following factors should be taken into consideration when selecting the material for listening: a. the topic of communication: whether it is within the ability of the students to understand, and what difficulties students will come across, b. the type of communication: whether it is a description or a narration. Description as a type of communication is less emotional and interesting, that is why it is difficult for the teacher to arouse students' interest in listening to such a text. Narration is more interesting for listening. Consequently, this type of communication should be used for listening comprehension. The context and students' readiness (intellectual and situational) to understand it is very important. The way the narrative progresses plays a great role. The title of the story may be helpful in comprehending the main idea of the text, too. The simpler the narrative progresses, the better it is for developing students' skills in listening. c. form of communication: whether the text is a dialogue or a monologue. The latter is easier for the learners, therefore, it is preferable for developing students' ability to listen. d. the number of times of presenting the material for listening:

whether the students should listen to the text once, twice, three times or more. Students should be taught to listen to the text once and this must become a habit. However, they sometimes can grasp only 50% of the information and even less, so a second presentation may be helpful. In case the students cannot grasp most of the information, practice proves that manifold repetitions when hearing do not help much. It is necessary to help students in comprehension by using a feedback established through a dialogue between the teacher and the class which takes as much time as it is required for the repetitive presentation of the material. The presence or the absence of the speaker plays an important role in listening. The most favorable condition is when students can see the speaker as is the case when the teacher speaks to them in a foreign language. In other words, the overall message is built up from phonetic units, which are placed together like building blocks and constructed into words, phrases and sentences. The listener stores the incoming sounds in the order they are heard and uses clues from within the text, such as his/her lexical knowledge, knowledge of syntactic structure, and linguistic features such as stress, pauses, and enunciation to recreate the meaning of what is heard and predict what will follow. Top-down processes on the other hand utilize "knowledge that a listener brings to a text" to actively build a 'conceptual framework' for comprehending the text and construct meaning. "Top-down listening infers meaning from contextual clues and from making links between the spoken message and various types of prior knowledge which listeners hold inside their heads".In other words, top-down processing is concerned with how listeners use knowledge they already possess, often referred to as schemata, to reconstruct meaning from what they hear. Hedge lists three types of schemata used in top-down processing, namely content schemata, formal schemata, and script. Content schemata can refer to general world knowledge, sociocultural knowledge of the topic. Formal schemata refers to the rigid structure of some speech events, such as religious events or academic lectures. Finally, script refers to interactions where the speech follows a set pattern to some extent. Both top-down and bottom-up processes are seen to be simultaneous, working together in an interactive model. Both linguistic information within the text and prior knowledge are used by the listener to form an understanding of what was heard. This has implications for foreign language listening instruction in that both top-down and bottom-up processes will need to be taught if learners are to become competent listeners. The listening process is divided into 3 stages: 1) pre – listening where the context is established. The teacher creates motivation and students do some activities with the purpose of preparing them for what they will hear; 2) in – while listening, where learners do the mentioned tasks or find answers. There are two kinds of material and procedure. On the one hand, extensive reading helps students to acquire vocabulary and grammar and it usually takes place outside the classroom. They do it

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Consequently, in teaching listening comprehension the teacher should bear in mind all the difficulties students encounter when listening in a foreign language. These difficulties are of two types: 1. coming from the listeners; 2. caused by the listening material. The first problem students have involves: a) making prediction what the speaker talks about; b) guessing unknown words or phrases; c) recognizing points. The second problem involves: a) unfamiliar topics; b) different accents; c) authentic material; d) colloquial words; e) speed of speech. Solutions to the problems. To facilitate listening tasks and improve the learners' listening skills the teachers should let them: 1. adopt a positive attitude; 2. be responsive; 3. shut out distractions; 4. listen for the speaker's purpose; 5. look for the signals of what is to come; 6. look for summaries of what has gone before; 7. evaluate the supporting materials; 8. look for non-verbal clues. Not all the tips mentioned above can be followed and not all the problems can be overcome. Certain features of the message and the speaker, for instance, are inevitable. But this does not mean that the teacher can do nothing about them. She/he can at least provide the students with suitable listening materials, background and linguistic knowledge, enabling skills, pleasant classroom conditions, and useful exercises to help them discover effective listening strategies. Listening exercises are most effective if they are constructed round tasks expressing agreement or disagreement, taking notes, marking a picture or diagram according to instructions, and answering questions. 3. Provide students with different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, films, announcements, everyday conversation, English songs, and so on. Select short, simple listening texts with little redundancy for lower-level students and complicated authentic materials with more redundancy for advanced

learners. Provide background knowledge and linguistic knowledge, such as complex sentence structures and colloquial words and expressions, as needed. It may very well happen that during one lesson the teacher may serve as a psychologist, an actor or a singer. Teaching songs is, of course, both pleasant and effective. But to achieve better results in comprehension the teacher is a) to prepare the learners before they listen to anything; b) to show them pictures of characters from the song; c) to use actions as much as possible to accompany songs so that the listeners can participate . This will help build their confidence, and give them extra clues to the meaning of the words they are listening to. d) to use the same song again and again. Listening is a difficult skill so building the learners' confidence is vital at all stages of language learning. If they recognize the words they will be much more motivated. This is valid not only from a language point of view but also from a logical point of view. Listening to a song you know and like is always an enjoyable experience. Using songs and chants in class gives the students a chance to listen and reproduce the language they hear. They are working on the sounds, rhythm and intonation and can have a chance of sounding natural. Songs can be the first step which can be followed by more sophisticated material which will include hesitations, rephrasing, and a variety of accents. The language needs to be comprehensible and the level of difficulty can be controlled by the selection of the task . Use of authentic material, such as workplace training videos, audio tapes of actual workplace exchanges, and TV and radio broadcasts also becomes very helpful for listening. Opportunities to develop both top-down and bottom-up processing skills should be offered. As mentioned above, top-down oriented activities encourage the learners to discuss what they already know about a topic, and bottom-up practice activities give confidence in accurate hearing and comprehension of the components of the language (sounds, words, intonation, grammatical structures). The development of listening strategies should be encouraged as well. Predicting, asking for clarification, and using non-verbal cues are examples of strategies that increase chances for successful listening. For example, using video can help learners develop cognitive strategies. As they view a segment with the sound off, learners can be asked to make predictions about what is happening by answering questions about setting, action, and interaction; viewing the segment again with the sound on allows them to confirm or modify their hypothesis . Activities should teach, not test. Teachers should avoid using activities that tend to focus on memory rather than on the process of listening or that simply give practice rather than help learners develop listening ability. The teacher can facilitate the development of listening ability by creating listening lessons that guide the learner through three stages: pre-listening, the listening task, and post-listening. The pre-listening activity should establish the purpose of the listening activity and activate the schemata by encouraging the learners to think about and discuss what they already

know about the content of the listening text. This activity can also provide the background needed for them to understand the text, and it can focus attention on what to listen for. The post-listening activity should help the listener to evaluate success in carrying out the task and to integrate listening with the other language skills. The teacher should encourage practice outside the classroom whenever possible which can suggest effective solution to listening problems. ØºÂà¸ÆÎ² 213 Thus the role of the process of listening is crucial for developing listening comprehension skills. It is through listening that many students are exposed to new language necessary for overall progress in their foreign language. If learners cannot comprehend the input they are exposed to in the classroom, they may experience great difficulty in learning the language, as listening can have an impact on the development of speaking, reading and writing skills. Assisting learners in the development of listening comprehension is a challenge. It is a challenge that demands both the teacher's and the learner's attention because of the critical role that listening plays, not only in communication, but also in the acquisition of language. Knowledge of the listening process and factors that affect listening enable teachers to select or create listening texts and activities that meet the needs of the their adult EFL learners. Teachers, then, must weave these listening activities into the curriculum to create a balance that mirrors the real-world integration of listening with speaking, reading, and writing.

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