DIFFICULTIES IN CONDUCTING LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN MODERN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Summary

This article highlights the difficulties arising when conducting listening comprehension in modern English language teaching methodology. The article analyzes in detail the main difficulties students face during the language learning process, especially when acquiring auditory skills. The results of the analysis suggest that the mastery of such a language activity as listening comprehension allows a person to understand clearly what is being communicated to them and to respond adequately to what is said, helps correctly present their response to the opponent, which account for the dialogic speech basis. In order not to make the language learning process successful and fruitful, both educators and students should be able to identify, realize, analyze and overcome the obstacles encountered in the process of teaching and mastering listening comprehension.

Key words: English, auditory skills, methodology, language activity, obstacles.

1. Introduction

The English language is one of the most popular and requested languages all over the world. This language is necessary for anyone aware that without the knowledge of English nothing can be achieved in the modern world. In recent years, psychologists, psycholinguists and methodologists have been paying more and more attention to the problem of listening comprehension *(Bihych, 2006; Nikolaieva, 1999; Roman, 2009; Koestler, 1964; Sperber, 1995)*. Listening is a powerful means of teaching English. This type of speech activity allows mastering the sound side of the language studied, its phonemic component and intonation. Through listening comprehension comes an active acquisition of the lexical composition and its grammatical structure.

Listening is the foundation of communication and it forms the mastery of oral interaction. It consists of the ability to distinguish sounds perceived, integrate them into semantic complexes, hold them in memory while listening, make probabilistic predictions and, depending on the communicative situation, understand the auditory target perceived.

Despite the fact that the problem of listening comprehension has already been considered *(Nikolaieva, 1999: 117-142)*, it is still one of the most relevant issues in modern English language teaching methodology, since no speech communication is possible without listening, as it represents a bilateral process.

The relevance of this study lies in the necessity of identifying the difficulties arising when conducting listening comprehension in the modern English language teaching methodology.

The object of the study is listening comprehension as a leading method of teaching students a foreign language in modern methodology.

The subject of the research is not only the listening process itself, but also the difficulties encountered in carrying out this kind of speech activity.

The aim of the article is to reveal the main difficulties arising when conducting listening comprehension in modern methods of teaching English.

The research is based on the textbooks on the methodology of teaching foreign languages.

2. Listening as a basic communicative activity

Listening is considered in relation to application to academic work at foreign language classes as understanding foreign language speech by ear while it is being spoken. It implies understanding a speaker's accent, grammatical structures and vocabulary possessed (a lecturer, teacher or native speaker). The problem of teaching authentic speech listening comprehension is one of the most important teaching foreign language communication aspects.

Listening, as a part of oral communicative activity, is used in any oral communication depending on productive, social, or personal needs, being a powerful means of teaching a foreign language. Listening helps students master the aural aspect of the target language, its phonemic structure and intonation, and facilitates speaking, reading, and writing. If a student understands audio speech, it is easier for them to understand graphic speech as well, that is to change what they see into what it should sound like.

3. The main difficulties arising when conducting listening comprehension

Hence, listening is the only kind of speech activity in which nothing depends on the person performing it. A listener, unlike a reader, writer or speaker, is powerless to change anything in the activity being performed, to facilitate it, to adapt it to their abilities and thereby create favorable conditions for receiving information. Since the main goal of teaching is to prepare the learner for speech communication in natural conditions, the learning process will only be purposeful and effective when the learner has met the difficulties of natural speech and learned how to overcome them. Speaking about the difficulties arising in the learning of listening, we are referring, first of all, to those difficulties that arise in the perception of foreign speech aurally. When listening to foreign speech, many things may make the process challenging: the content of the speech; the choice of linguistic means used by the speaker; the tempo which the speaker uses; the specifics of the speaker's speech: elision, that is strong reduction or "swallowing" of certain sounds; lack of speech clarity; the pitch of the speaker's voice, volume, etc. These difficulties are categorized as follows:

1) difficulties related to the nature of the linguistic material;
2) difficulties regarding semantic content;
3) difficulties involving linguistic forms of the message;
4) difficulties concerning the sources of information;
5) difficulties considering the conditions of message presentation;
6) difficulties regarding the mastery of sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence.

We suggest considering all aforementioned groups of difficulties arising when conducting listening comprehension in modern English language teaching methodology.

The first group includes difficulties determined by the nature of the linguistic material. These complexities can be divided into phonetic, lexical and grammatical ones.

Phonetic difficulties can be both common to all foreign languages and specific to individual languages. A common difficulty is the absence of a clear boundary between sounds in a word and between words in a sentence. Here we distinguish two aspects of hearing: a phonematic (the perception of specific language phenomena at the level of words and structures) and speech, which includes the process of recognition of the whole in context (it should be noted that when teaching listening to authentic materials it is necessary to develop mainly the speech auditory skills). The next difficulty is the rhythmic and melodic pattern of the English language. For example, a sentence in English always begins with a falling pitch, and at the end it either falls or rises, only then it becomes clear what kind of sentence it is: an interrogative, exclamatory, or affirmative one. A particular challenge for a Ukrainian learner lies in the fact that in foreign languages such qualities of sound as length and shortness, openness and closeness have a distinctive meaning. In Ukrainian, these qualities are not differentiators of phonemes, but rather the shades of the same form. In addition, the incomplete style of pronunciation, which is typical for a spoken language, causes considerable difficulties in perceiving oral speech, as the same words sometimes acquire different meanings.

Lexical difficulties include the presence of homonyms and homophones in English; words similar in sound, especially paronyms; words expressing paired concepts; words with the same compatibility. It is the presence of many unfamiliar words that students point to as the main reason for not understanding the text. The greatest difficulty in the perception of foreign language speech is that the linguistic form is an unreliable support for semantic prediction, because student's attention is focused on it, so it is necessary to develop students' ability to take information despite facing unfamiliar language phenomena by its filtering, selection and rough interpretation. Students must be specially trained to understand speech containing unknown vocabulary by ear. Unrecognized or misrecognized parts of a speech message (words, collocations, phrases) are reconstructed by students through the action of probabilistic prediction (the ability to assume new patterns in relying on already known ones), therefore it is necessary to achieve prediction of an utterance meaning when the form and content become a complete entity.

Grammatical difficulties involve a number of complications associated primarily with the occurrence of grammatical forms that are not typical of the Ukrainian language. While perceiving a phrase, the student must decompose it into separate elements, that is to identify informative features of the phrase, which are physically expressed by the corresponding speech qualities. There are three physically expressed speech attributes: intonation, pauses and logical accent.

In the field of grammar, great difficulty in understanding English speech arises from the fact that in the vast majority of cases the connection between words is established by means of various function words, which have no independent lexical meaning. Students not only have to get used to the new way of linking words, but they also should be able to catch the function words and correctly relate them to other words in a sentence. They must learn to do this rapidly, since their inability to slow down or speed up the pace of the speaker's speech. However, it is quite hard to recognize function words when listening to a spoken language, because they are often in the voiceless position and therefore can merge with other words (*give her hat*). In addition, weak forms of function words (*you've, he's*) are used mainly in oral speech. Recognition of function words by hearing is also confusing due to the fact that many function words can also be notional (the verbs *to be*, *to have*). It is worth noting that a number of function words, being different parts of speech, coincide in form, but their meanings may both be similar (the adverb *off* and preposition *of*), and sometimes even opposite (the adverb *off*, preposition *off* and

postposition *off* in some phrasal verbs like *to put off*). A great challenge is to understand formative suffixes and inflexions in English by ear characterized by homonymy and polysemy (*-s* as a suffix of plural nouns, the possessive case of nouns, and the third person ending of singular verbs in the Present Indefinite Tense). It should also be mentioned that some parts of speech in English are not as clear-cut as in Ukrainian, which also creates additional difficulties in the understanding of English speech by students. Moreover, the stylistic features of oral speech also complicate listening comprehension. These features are the indirect word order or "inversion", disjunctive subordination (*he told us he would come*), the presence of elliptic sentences, the use of special constructions typical for a spoken language etc.

The second group of difficulties related to the semantic content depends primarily on students' interest in understanding the information perceived. Experimental results show that students are more likely to understand and remember difficult but meaningful texts rather than easy but primitive ones. Descriptive texts are usually less interesting and emotional, so when listening to these texts the description is often detailed, thus complicating them even more. A long narrative text attracts attention more easily and arouses a desire to understand what is being heard. When grasping such a text, the separate parts do not have the significance unlike listening to a descriptive text. There tends to be a certain perceptual focus which helps to overcome possible comprehension barriers. Difficulties in understanding the content can also be caused by the peculiarities of a text composition. The presence of multiple storylines splits a listener's attention and retards comprehension. It is necessary to aim at introducing texts with simpler context containing more key information and fewer redundant elements.

The third group of difficulties, connected with the linguistic form of the message, arises for two reasons: a) due to the linguistic material contained in the message, and b) due to the presence of familiar linguistic material in the message, which is difficult to perceive by ear *(Nikolaieva, 1999)*. Length of sentences is another issue to be considered. The capacity of short-term memory, in which a phrase is stored up to its end, is known to be limited. In case the length of a sentence exceeds any memory capacity, a listener forgets the beginning of a phrase and therefore cannot interpret its meaning. It has also been proven that students who have not yet mastered the foreign language possess much smaller memory capacity. Therefore, at the beginning of training the length of the utterance should not exceed five or six words. It should also be noted that not only the length of the phrase affects its retention in memory, but also its depth. Thus, simple sentences are easier to remember, complex sentences vice versa. For this reason, short simple sentences with object and adverbial clauses should be predominantly used first. Then it is necessary to gradually increase the number of sentences and diversify their types.

The fourth group of difficulties concerns information sources. It includes audiovisual and auditory sources of information. Audiovisual sources comprise all kinds of visuals accompanied by the teacher's narration, filmstrips and motion pictures dubbing etc. Auditory sources include gramophone recordings, phono recordings, and radio broadcasts. Obviously, it is easier to perceive speech from audiovisual sources than from auditory ones. For methodological purposes, it is important to distinguish between suggested or pictorial visuals as well as speakers' gestures and facial expressions, which, while not revealing content, convey speakers' emotional attitude toward the utterance. Observing a speaker's articulation connects the auditory sense and makes the perception of sounding speech clearer and more accurate. Auditory sources of information are most intricate, as they do not contain any visual support. In addition, the role of auditory sources in the learning process should not be underestimated. They compensate for the lack of a language environment by providing the opportunity to listen to speakers' native speech. Recorded speech has an exemplary and unchanging sound. These qualities of sound

recordings contribute to the formation of correct acoustic-articulatory images of words, which is highly important for listening comprehension *(Nikolaieva, 2008)*.

The fifth group of difficulties is associated with the conditions of a message presentation. In this case, the correct pace of speech messages is of great importance. It determines not only the speed and accuracy of understanding the messages conveyed, but also the efficiency of memorization. There exists a maximum speed of verbal messages presentation, an increase or reduction of which leads to a drastic decrease either in activity or in the level of understanding (or both), fatigue and an emotional tone decline. If the speed is exceeded, comprehension is hampered by an increase in reduction of sounds, a decrease in pauses between syntagms, and a lack of time for the meaning interpretation. If the speed is too slow, the phase of perception is extended, making it difficult to integrate the meanings of separate units. Thus, a medium speed of speech is considered to be the most acceptable in the process of communication.

The sixth group of difficulties involves mastering sociolinguistic and sociocultural competences. Sociolinguistic competence means knowledge of language usage norms in different situations and being able to apply situational expression variants of the same communicative intention, respectively, the listener should know these variants and understand the reasons for using one of them in the context of a particular communication situation.

Sociocultural competence implies knowledge of the rules and social behavior norms of native speakers, including traditions, history, culture and social system of the country of the language being studied.

Consequently, a learner must have the ability to perceive and understand an oral text from the perspective of intercultural communication, for which they need some background knowledge. Only being aware of peculiarities of a certain mentality, a listener can correctly interpret a native speaker's verbal and non-verbal behavior. Lack of knowledge of the language usage norms in accordance with the situation, the inability to use the situational variants of the same intentionexpression, ignorance of the rules and social norms of native speakers' behaviour, traditions, history and culture might hinder the interpretation of a partner's verbal behavior and understanding of the information perceived by ear.

4. Conclusions

Listening comprehension is the basis of communication initiating acquisition of oral communication. Listening mastery allows a person to understand what is reported to them and to react appropriately to what is said, helps properly present an answer to the interlocutor, which forms the basis of dialogic discourse. In this case, listening cultivates the culture of speech: one should listen to the partner carefully and always to the end, and this is important not only when speaking a foreign language, but also when communicating in your native one. Listening is also of paramount importance when learning sounds, it is vital that the students catch the sound clearly, and with the teacher's support, be able to reproduce it. Here they must detect the difference between how the teacher pronounces it and their own pronunciation; the teacher must demand that they pronounce the sound more correctly, as close as possible to the original pronunciation, and then make corrections immediately after the sound reproduction, if need be. Incorrect pronunciation leads to misunderstanding the meaning of what is said. The role of listening comprehension in teaching a foreign language should not be underestimated. However, like the role of other types of speech activity, it is impossible to separate listening from speaking, writing, or reading. Communicative features of listening as a type of speech activity have a dominant role at all stages of teaching a foreign language and constantly growing requirements

for the level of foreign language proficiency demand from a modern teacher the obligatory inclusion of listening tasks during the educational process.

Thus, listening comprehension is a highly complex type of speech activity that embraces a large number of difficulties (difficulties related to the nature of the linguistic material, semantic content, linguistic forms of the message, the sources of information, the conditions of message presentation, the mastery of sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence). Listening comprehension teaching is aimed specifically at overcoming these difficulties.

The perspectives of further research will include the study and analysis of psychophysiological mechanisms of listening comprehension (perception, recognition, understanding and interpretation).

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