Teaching and learning listening comprehension: A challenge to be overcome

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Abstract
In relation to the learning of English as a Foreign Language, research on the field of listening comprehension suggests that Andalusian students experience difficulty in reaching good level. The purpose of this article is to analyse the listening comprehension process, pointing out possible problems that students may face. Once considered it, a plan for the improvement of listening comprehension will be proposed. It will be aimed at guaranteeing a greater success in the acquisition of this skill.

Keywords: listening comprehension, top-down processing, bottom-up processing, difficulties, listening strategies, task

1. INTRODUCTION

It is nowadays well-known that listening comprehension is one of the essential language skills for students of a second language (L2) to acquire. In fact, the Spanish Core Curricular Design for Compulsory Secondary Education (Royal Decree 1105/2014, December, BOE n.3) states that comprehension of oral texts is one of the four main areas to develop in the learning of the first foreign language. The importance of developing this skill is given by the fact that being a good listener is a prerequisite for successful communication.

If listening comprehension plays such a significant role in L2 learning, we should then wonder whether enough attention is paid to its development in Andalusian high schools. The answer to this question may be found in two studies conducted with students of secondary education from different high schools in Andalusia.

- In 2008, Corpas carried out her study with fifty-three students in the second year of Compulsory Secondary Education to check students’ level in listening comprehension at the end of the first stage of CSE. She found out that students only achieved a little more than a half of the objectives proposed in the Andalusian Core Curricular Design for language learning (Corpas, 2008).

- In 2009, Corpas and Madrid carried out a similar study. This time, the population was composed of ninety-four students in the fourth year of Compulsory Secondary Education. They were also interested in finding out the level in English listening comprehension that students had reached at the end of CSE. Their results showed that the listening skills of 87% of students were insufficient (Corpas and Madrid, 2009).

Taking this information into consideration, the aim of this paper is to suggest a possible plan for the improvement of listening comprehension. However, before doing that, it is important to have a look at some aspects related to listening comprehension. These are its value, how it is processed by learners and the difficulties when processing it.
2. THE VALUE OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Listening is together with reading the greatest source of input for learners, and input stands as one of the necessary conditions to acquire the second language. This is supported by important researchers on language acquisition. For instance, when developing his Monitor Model, Krashen (1982) includes the Input Hypothesis which asserts that learners must be exposed to a large amount of comprehensible input (i+1) in order to acquire the second language. In the same way, Ellis (2008) states that students need to be exposed to extensive input in the L2 for instruction to be successful.

It is also relevant to bear in mind that listening tasks allow learners to deal with other components of the language (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation patterns etc.), components which are necessary for L2 communication. Thus, listening makes it easier to develop proficiency in other skills. In this regard, Xu states that “proficiency in listening comprehension is readily transferable to other language skills (including speaking and reading)” (Xu, 2011:164). However, being listening comprehension such an important skill, it is still found that “listening and speaking are not important parts of many course books or curricula and teachers do not seem to pay attention to these skills while designing their lessons” (Pourhossein and Reza, 2011:978). It is precisely this issue which supports the proposal of an improvement plan.

3. WHAT DOES THE PROCESS OF LISTENING ENTAIL?

Listening is not the passive process we may initially think of. In fact, Xu highlights that “today we recognize that listening is an “active” process, and that good listeners are just as active when listening as speakers as when speaking” (Xu, 2011:161). Therefore, it can be deduced that during the listening process, learners constantly struggle to make meaning of the information they are receiving from the speaker. In this process of decoding and making sense, they are engaged in two important types of processing: bottom-up and top-down processing.

Top-down processing is the type of processing in which learners use their background knowledge (knowledge of the world and knowledge of the language) to decode the meaning of the message. On the contrary, bottom-up processing is based on using the new information itself to work out the meaning of the message (Kurita, 2012:32). This suggests that learners should be aware of the existence of these processes and make use of them depending on the situation.

4. DIFFICULTIES FACED BY STUDENTS WHEN APPROACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION

At this point, it is worth making reference to some of the problems that learners encounter when doing listening tasks, since they often find listening comprehension the most difficult skill to acquire (Kurita, 2012).

Underwood (1989) points out seven causes or obstacles to efficient listening comprehension. Among them, the impossibility to control the speed of delivery, a limited range of vocabulary, a possible lack of contextual knowledge, the difficulties to concentrate, and possible negative learning habits such as the desire to understand every single word (cited in Pourhossein and Reza, 2001:981-982). In the context of Andalusia, two are the main difficulties encountered by learners. In her study, Corpas (2008) discovered that our students find it difficult to understand both global and specific details from oral texts in English. On the other hand, Corpas and Madrid (2009) highlighted the difficulty for students to carry out deductive and reflective processes on the oral input they receive.

5. PROPOSAL OF A PLAN TO IMPROVE LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN HIGH SCHOOLS

This plan is aimed at improving listening comprehension by carrying out two specific measures: the explicit instruction of listening comprehension strategies and the three-fold approach to listening tasks based on pre-task, while-task, and post-task.

- Description of measures

1. Training students on listening comprehension strategies:

One of the first steps to do a listening comprehension task is a clear understanding of the possible ways to approach it successfully (i.e., to control learning). In this regard, it seems obvious that learners should be equipped with a series of learning strategies (cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective) for effective listening comprehension. Pourhossein and Reza state that “both textbooks and teachers’ books should include information on how to train students in various
listening strategies” (Pourhossein and Reza, 2011:986). Nevertheless, a great deal of textbooks does not provide this kind of information. As a result, the teacher is left alone with the responsibility of bringing supporting material for students which ensure they are aware of at least some the most effective learning strategies. This also means making sure that students are exposed to and instructed on the use of strategies for listening comprehension over a period of time, not just once.

As an example, Kurita claims that “speakers stress what they think is important, and the most important words” (Kurita, 2012:35), so encouraging students to take into account stress and intonation is a good strategy for them to get the most important information from the oral input they receive. This learning strategy, which is called selective attention, would also solve other difficulty for learners. Some learners face frustration in their attempt to make meaning of every single word. Therefore, by focusing on the most important parts of the input, this will be avoided. In relation to this, Kurita (2012) also highlights that affective factors such as frustration or anxiety will have negative effects on listening comprehension. Apart from this strategy, other relevant strategies are related to top-down and bottom-up processing mentioned above. Although these processes are often carried out unconsciously, it would be a good idea to make students aware of the important role that factors such as the surrounding context of words play in the understanding of the message.

2. Following a three-fold approach to listening tasks: pre-task, while-task and post-task.

Working with tasks that follow this typology offers many benefits, especially when dealing with listening comprehension and the difficulties it poses for students. Pourhossein and Reza (2011) explain that the sequence pre-, while-, and post-tasks has the following aims. By doing a pre-task, students have the opportunity to activate their previous schemata and to be set in context. A while-task is useful for students to concentrate on the oral input they are getting. Therefore, it also stimulates their reactions and responses. A post-task allows them to connect new information with their life experiences by interpreting and reflecting on such information.

In the same article, Pourhossein and Reza suggest that “textbook and teacher’s books should provide or at least suggest a framework of activities which are integrated with listening strategies: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening” (Pourhossein and Reza, 2011:985). Despite the advantages of using this structure, it can be checked that many listening tasks in textbooks focus directly on the while-task, ignoring the pre- and post- tasks. Nevertheless, the importance of setting the learner in context cannot be forgotten, especially because lack of contextual information has been suggested as an obstacle for learners when approaching English listening comprehension. Then, it may end up in learner’s frustration. Corpas and Madrid point out that when doing listening tasks, “it is also important to integrate the development of oral and written skills” (Corpas and Madrid, 2009:132). Then, the post-listening task stands as a good vehicle to achieve this end.

To solve this problem, teachers have two possible options. On the one hand, they may work with the listening tasks included in the book, but adding a pre-listening and a post-listening task. On the other hand, they may select authentic listening activities and design the pre-, while-, and post-listening tasks by themselves.

6. CONCLUSION

I would like to finish this paper with a quotation by Kurita which perfectly illustrates the main issue that has been dealt with: “‘Listening comprehension is at the heart of language learning” (Kurita, 2012:30). Bearing this in mind, the aim of this paper has been to show that despite the importance attached to listening comprehension, our learners do not seem to master this skill. It can be corroborated by having a look at some research in Andalusia. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the measures proposed here may be applied to different classrooms contexts in different high schools.
Bibliografía

- Real Decreto 1105/2014, de 26 de diciembre, por el que se establece el currículo básico de la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria y del Bachillerato.