

## Promoting Process-Oriented Methodology to Teaching Listening Comprehension in EFL Classes

Mahbouba MESSEREHI

Université de Khenchela, Algérie, mahbouba.messerhi@gmail.com

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### تعزيز الطريقة القائمة على العملية الموجهة في تدريس الفهم السمعي لتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

الملخص:

لطالما كان الفهم السمعي تحديًا حقيقيًا لكثير من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الذين يواجهون صعوبات في فهم خطاب المتحدثين الأصليين. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى دراسة ومناقشة الجوانب التفصيلية للطريقة القائمة على العملية الموجهة لتدريس مهارات الاستماع لتوفير بعض الإرشادات حول كيفية تطبيقها في دروس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وقد نحت الأبحاث المتعلقة بالفهم السمعي في السنوات الأخيرة نحو الارتكاز إلى طريقة أكثر توجهاً نحو العملية والتي تستند على تقديم تمارين موجزة ومكثفة للمتعلمين لتحسين ممارسة مختلف مهارات الاستماع الفرعية.

يتم توجيه المتعلمين خلال عملية الاستماع نحو تحسين الفهم عن طريق توفير تعليمات لمساعدتهم في تحديد الكلمات الفردية، والتعرف على ميزات الكلام المتصل. وبناءً على ذلك، تمّ اعتماد بعض

التوجيهات من أجل تزويد المعلمين ومعدّي المناهج ببعض الإرشادات لتنفيذ هذه الطريقة في تدريس الاستماع. الكلمات المفتاحية: الانكليزية، الاستماع؛ صعوبات؛ الطريقة الموجهة؛ الفهم.

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#### Abstract

Listening comprehension has always been a real challenge for many EFL learners who struggle to understand the native speakers' spoken discourse. The aim of this research paper is to consider and discuss in details aspects of the process-based approach to teaching listening skills in order to provide some guidelines on how to implement it in EFL classes. Actually, research related to teaching listening comprehension, in recent years, has shifted the focus to a more process-oriented methodology.

This approach is based on giving learners intensive practice on small-scale exercises that contribute to improve the practice of various listening sub-skills. Learners are guided through the listening process towards improved comprehension by providing instruction to help them in individual word identification, and recognition of features of connected speech. Accordingly, some useful implications have been drawn in order to provide teachers and material designers with some guidelines for implementing this approach in listening instructions.

**Keywords:** listening; difficulties; approach; comprehension; process.

## Introduction

listening plays an important role in the process of learning or acquisition of any language. In fact, developing listening skills is crucial for language learners because they need to be able to understand what people are saying to them in English, either face-to-face, or on any recorded media (TV, radio, CDs, internet, etc.). Listening can also help students to improve their pronunciation; the more they listen and understand spoken English, the more they get accustomed to appropriate intonation, stress, and the sounds of both individual words, and connected speech. Furthermore, listening is a key for effective communication as indicated by Harmer (2007: 133), “successful spoken communication depends not only on people’s ability to speak, but also on the effectiveness of the way they listen,”.

However, given the complexity of the listening comprehension process, foreign language learners encounter many difficulties to cope with native speakers’ natural speech. Hence, one way to help them overcome their difficulties is by providing the appropriate teaching methodology, which would enhance their listening comprehension. Subsequently, some new approaches have been proposed to address learners’ shortcomings as listeners; namely, the process approach.

The current research aims to shed light on the theoretical aspects underlying process-oriented methodology to teach listening comprehension, which was proposed recently as an alternative to the comprehension approach that has prevailed listening instructions for a long time ago. The main objective is to consider the need for adapting this methodology in our EFL classes. Firstly, this paper tackles learners’ difficulties in listening and examines the different methodologies regarding

teaching listening comprehension. Finally, it provides insights about the process approach, and how it can be implemented in EFL settings to improve learners' comprehension.

### **Learners' Difficulties in Listening**

Despite its importance as an active skill that involves many processes, the role of listening comprehension in language learning is generally taken for granted; students would consider listening as being quiet and paying passive attention to the teacher. Particularly, students may spend most of their class time listening; however, they still face many challenges to understand spoken English. In fact, Rost (2012) mentions that listening comprehension remains one of the least understood processes and learners often regard listening as the most difficult language skill to acquire and evaluate.

According to Harmer (2007), although students are perfectly capable of listening to different things in different ways in their own language(s) i.e., multiskilling, they find this exceptionally difficult in a foreign language especially that the way people speak is often significantly different from the way they write.

Given the challenging nature of listening comprehension, researchers such as Scrivener (2005) and Ur (1984) have identified a number of listening problems that students face. Typically, learners have difficulties to understand the spoken language regarding aspects such as:

- Connected speech: spoken English is characterised by the use of features of connected speech such as contracted forms, stress, missing sounds, elision, assimilation, rhythm and intonation. This makes it sound very confusing to learners, who would perceive native speakers as being speaking too fast. In fact, some features of English pronunciation make it

harder to understand than some other languages. Particularly, pronunciation aspects like being unfamiliar with the speaker's accent, or being unable to cope with the speed of delivery (learners may be used to hearing graded language in the classroom and are not able to process language spoken at natural speed) are also a challenge for learners.

- Features of spoken language: in oral speech a lot of redundancy is used, such as the use of fillers repeatedly, for instance, *well, I mean, you know, like*, etc., which students do not see in written language. Besides, false starts, pauses, self-correction, are all very different from written language.

- Colloquial language: it includes idioms, slung, reduced forms, and shared cultural knowledge. Colloquial language is very difficult to learn if learners are not in the target culture, and this is a problem for many students, who live in their countries and do not interact with American or British culture.

Although listening abilities may vary among learners depending on their individual capacities including their learning style, their type of intelligence and their motivation, the majority of foreign language learners have some common problems that hinder them to understand the spoken discourse.

As indicated above, some frequent challenges that learners meet are generally related to: aspects of English pronunciation, colloquial (sometimes unknown) language, and features of spoken English such as redundancy, hesitation, and ellipsis. Furthermore, other barriers may be related to lack of concentration due to either external factors such as background noise, or internal factors such as fatigue (the more tired a listener is, the more difficult for him to stay focussed), and lack of confidence (lacking in confidence inhibits learners to employ all their mental resources to the task of listening). Subsequently, any approach that attempts to develop students' listening skills should take into

consideration those problems, and work on helping learners to overcome their difficulties.

### **Approaches to Teach Listening**

Listening comprehension implies the use of multiple mental processes involved in making sense of spoken language. These include recognizing speech sounds, understanding the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences in which they are presented.

As far as teaching listening is concerned, comprehension activities in class are designed to achieve two main aims: first, to get general overview of the main message of a conversation (i.e. to catch the gist); second, to catch specific details such as names, numbers, addresses, etc. (Scrivener. 2005: 173).

Traditionally, two broad distinctions have been made to consider the procedures involved when listeners are engaged in comprehension, these are known as: top-down processing and bottom-up processing. The listener uses (bottom-up processes) to assemble the message piece-by-piece from the speech stream, going from the parts to the whole. Top-down processes involve the listener going in from the whole – their prior knowledge and their content and rhetorical schemata – to the parts (Harmer, 2007).

**Bottom-up Processing:** this refers to the knowledge of the language itself such as the sounds, the vocabulary, the grammar of the language, etc. In this kind of processing, the listener tries to understand by working through language; first at the level of the word, then at the sentence level, and then extracting meaning from it. This means starting from the bottom or language heard, analysing it mentally, and then

arriving at the top, which is the meaning; for that reason, it called bottom-up processing.

**Top-down Processing:** this mainly refers to the background knowledge such as the topic, the genre of the text, or any information. Typically, in a top-down processing, listeners can use their prior knowledge to help them understand what is said because they are expecting what they will hear.

Another way that top-down processing is used is what is known as “content schemata”; it is all about what the listener knows about a word, for example, if students hear the word “computer”, they can use all what they know about computers to help them predict what might be said about them. This kind of processing suggests that listeners start from meaning and then work towards language; it means they bring to comprehension background knowledge to overcome some of the bottom-up processing they might come across. Clearly, top down processing is very important and helpful, and facilitates the task for learners when they have an idea about what they will hear.

Actually, researchers maintain that bottom-up and top-down processing are both useful for comprehension, and the two go side by side. The more we know about a topic, the more background knowledge we are able to access, the more top-down processing we are able to make use of, the less we know about a topic, the more language-based processing we will have to make use of.

### **Problems with the Comprehension Approach**

The comprehension approach has dominated teaching listening methodologies in language classes for decades as most practitioners are building their lesson plans following this approach. The comprehension approach is mainly based

on the assumption that learners would develop their listening skill by being able to provide correct answers to comprehension questions in the listening tasks, i.e. focussing on the product rather than the process that learners go through in order to reach the final objective; thus, being able to understand the content of the listening passage. However, this approach falls short to account for learners' needs. Researchers questioned the efficiency of this methodology on developing the learners' listening skills, as Field (2008) put it in this quotation, "it does little or nothing to improve the effectiveness of their listening or to address their shortcomings as listeners".

Practitioners and methodologists have often expressed reservations about the effectiveness of the comprehension approach. Perhaps the most frequently addressed criticism is the view that the comprehension approach tests listening but does little or nothing to teach it. In fact, Field (2008: 80) highlights that this is a serious charge: it is an educational axiom that an instructor should not test a skill or a body of knowledge unless it has first been taught.

Scrivener (2005: 171) points out that the questions might be pointless as they may not be necessarily what someone would listen for if the conversation was heard in real life; the questions seem more of a memory test than anything else.

According to Field (2008), the traditional approach to teaching listening treated this skill as a "whole", by using this methodology; the focus is on the outcome (the product rather than the process). Accordingly, evaluating the learners' development is measured according to their performance i.e., their ability to answer comprehension questions. Little attention is paid to the ways (the processes) learners use to

reach this final outcome, or the difficulties they face. The comprehensive approach also tends to deal with phonology and listening as separate strands. Using new methodologies, however, researchers point out that these are inextricably interrelated processes that are best taught interactively rather than separately. Most importantly, in a comprehension approach methodology, it is often hard to know whether the learners got the correct answer because they have been able to understand the input or simply by chance (guess). Particularly, following the comprehension approach, the majority of learners report facing the same difficulties every time they are introduced to any new listening materials or situations.

All the difficulties, mentioned previously, imply that developing foreign language learners' listening skill requires more than just evaluating them based on their ability to provide correct answers to the listening tasks as advocated by the comprehension approach. In fact, being aware of learners' difficulties requires a change in current practices in order to meet the learners' need to develop strategies that would help them get the most from the listening passages in a consistent way. Particularly, learners need to be underpinned with techniques that they would apply in different situations of communication on a basic level. As highlighted by Field (2008), being aware of the learners' difficulties in listening is a key issue to enhance their abilities.

Alternatively, following a process approach, the emphasis on developing listening sub-skills such as segmentation, understanding rhythm, and intonation, following signposts such as discourse markers and cohesive devices, prediction and checking understanding should be an integral part of any listening lesson.

## Guidelines for Implementing the Process Approach

Listening comprehension, as previously mentioned, is a complex, active process that involves matching the sounds that listeners can hear with the meaning they know to make sense of it. However, it is not as simple as this; the listener goes from different levels of sounds where they start from phonemes and morphemes to the level of words, and then to the level of group of words (e.g., collocations, chunks of language, etc.), then the sentence level, and finally the level of the text. As already pointed out, some of the problems that learner come across while listening in English are associated to features of English pronunciation. Following the process approach, these features can be addressed by implementing activities to raise learners' awareness of these aspects.

For example, a sentence like this:

*I am ill, but I will meet her next week* might sound like this:  
*Eye mill but I'll metre necks weak*

This kind of sentences can confuse learners because they don't hear what they expect to hear, especially that once they think they heard; for instance, *metre or necks*, they try to process that in a top-down way to understand it, but they cannot. Another problem for learners is weak forms; many English words especially common function words such as prepositions, articles, auxiliaries, pronouns, have weak forms and they might sound very different to what learners expect to hear, for instance, learners are expecting to hear: *of, have, are, a*, and actually what they hear is just *a*.

In 2008, John Field published his book: *Listening in the Language Classroom*, which is based on his research into bottom-up processing, and he suggested an approach that gives learners intensive practice on small-scale exercises that contribute to improve practice of various listening sub-skills.

From his research, Field has drawn some useful implications to teach listening using a process-based approach, and provided some general guidelines for its implementation. Therefore, some practical tools to use process methodology for teaching listening comprehension include the following:

**Dictation:** the aim is not spelling; it is about improving learner's listening skills and making them more aware of aspects of spoken language. Teachers can regularly dictate short sentences, which can help to raise students' awareness to aspects of connected speech, especially with common function words: e.g. contrasting pairs of sentences such as:

*I could have done **it better** and could I have a **bit of butter***

**Contrasting pairs:** teachers can also **raise awareness of word boundary** issue in the same way i.e., dictating contrasting pairs of sentences like:

*Come **along** with me / it's a **long** way. It won't **belong** / she dosen't **belong**.*

In the two examples above, the words in bold sound the same, but they are not. Another example is:

*She's got a terrible **teacher**. She doesn't **teach her** anything.*

These two expressions sound the same too, but actually they are not.

Another useful activity is to dictate a short sentence and ask learners to **identify and count the number of words in that sentence**; for instance,

*How much longer's it going to take you, I suppose we'll just have to wait and see,*

Students can work in pairs and try to **identify the individual words** and **reconstruct the sentence**.

In order to make this kind of activities successful, they have to be short and often; including them on a frequent basis can be interesting and enjoyable. Learners will notice that they

can benefit from them when they start to understand more about features of English pronunciation.

Clearly, a “complementary approach” that combines listening and phonology seem to be a useful one; integrating the teaching of the phonological aspects of English in a listening lesson would be of great benefit for learners. While listening, students should be trained to identify individual words, and recognise features of connected speech such as weak forms, linking, elision and assimilation, and making use of word stress as well as sentence stress. Intonation, too, plays a role in the meaning of certain messages, so learner should adjust their ears on the rhythm of English especially if this latter differs from their L1 (time-stressed and syllable stressed languages).

Moreover, putting more emphasis on the sub-skills involved in the process of listening comprehension would provide great help for learners as they are directly related to the difficulties that they generally confront. Other listening sub-skills might include raising learners’ awareness to the use and interpreting of discourse markers and cohesive devices, which can be used differently in spoken language compared to written one. Prediction is also a key sub-skill that native speakers rely on to infer meaning, or to complete unfinished information. Therefore, learners need to promote this skill, which is basically related to the mastery of the linguistic system, and which requires knowledge of a wide range of different lexical chunks. These latter can facilitate the learners’ task to construct meaning. When it comes to interactive listening, it is also useful to reinforce learners’ ability to check understanding because when learners are able to spot the ambiguity, they will be able to ask for clarification to understand their interlocutor. As it is clearly stated by recent approaches, the process of listening involves so many

sub-skills that should be addressed in the language classroom as long as the objective is to promote the learners' listening skill.

In fact, a process-based approach to teaching listening comprehension, as has been shown, is of great importance and value; however, teachers should take into consideration the fact that no single approach can completely satisfy language teaching. Therefore, a combination of different approaches and strategies is the key for successful instruction

### **Conclusion**

Although listening might be taken for granted by native speakers since they almost make no effort to understand each other, it still remains a hard skill to master for foreign language learners. Therefore, developing EFL learners' listening comprehension represents a challenge for both teachers and learners. As far as teaching methodologies are concerned, recent views are putting the comprehension approach, which dominated the teaching of listening for decades, into question in terms of its efficiency. New methodologies advocated by researchers such as Field (1998, 2008) are in favour of a "process approach", which implies shifting focus from seeking correct answers to the listening tasks towards recognising learners' weaknesses to help them overcome their difficulties. In a process-oriented approach to teach listening, classroom activities should be oriented towards training learners to develop sub-skills such as segmentation, understanding rhythm, and intonation, recognising discourse markers and cohesive devices, prediction and checking understanding. Accordingly, promoting these sub-skills is going to serve as a preparation for longer and more integrated listening tasks. Actually, because the main barrier to intelligibility is pronunciation

rather than grammar, students should have access to a wide range of listening input including to different accents and dialects. The more they have exposure to natural speech, the easier they will find it to understand the spoken discourse and develop their listening skills.

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