Exploring Some Feasible Solutions for Listening Comprehension Impediments Observed among the First year Faculty of Arts Undergraduates

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Abstract: The primary objective of this investigation was to recognize the peculiar listening comprehension (LC) issues encountered by the Tamil medium first year undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts during transactional listening and suggest feasible and effective recommendations for the stakeholders based on classroom exploration. In order to accomplish this objective, Twenty seven Tamil medium English as a Second Language (ESL) first year listeners were randomly selected as sample population in the Faculty of Arts and a classroom investigation employing an intervention programme for one complete semester was conducted; the intervention programme was based on the data which have been elicited via questionnaire and informal discussion before the commencement of the actual investigation programme. The intervention programme incorporated some specially selected LC texts/activities, participant observation and informal discussions. Having employed qualitative methodology with the questionnaire, participant observation and retrospective report/verbalization, this study, at the end, found out that the ESL listeners' comprehension level progressed dramatically when training was provided with specially selected texts with appropriate background knowledge and activities to match our listeners' requirements to encounter their LC major impediments which were traced at the beginning of the study.

Keywords: Background knowledge, Context, impediments, Listening comprehension, Transactional listening.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, it can be observed that in L2 LC pedagogy two parallel methods mirror modern perspectives on successful LC process. While one maintains the integrated teaching of listening for communication and in combination with other L2 skills (reading, writing and speaking), the other posits the learner's application of metacognitive and cognitive strategies to strengthen the learning procedure [3].

In L2 LC processes, a listener internalises acoustic signals as input and elaborates on them applying his/her wide array of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge (background knowledge) for interpreting speaker's intended meaning. Listeners can receive messages conveyed to their ears as sound waves pass through the medium of hearing organs. However, comprehending intended message is highly complex; it cannot be a single function of decoding as pointed out by many scholars. Therefore, providing appropriate practice in LC in the ESL classrooms becomes a great challenge for teachers. Thus, this classroom situation needs special attention in every aspect of LC teaching including texts.

Based on current understanding of applied linguists' view, LC is highly complex and active rather than playing passive role. Interpreting processes of the incoming signal is ongoing and vivacious internal procedures to promote appropriate intended meaning. It is unreasonable to say that these processes are simple operations of decoding language or messages; these processes are also invisible internal cognitive network operations, which occur within listeners' brain and the details of these processes are still a puzzle. These complexities in nature also reflect in some of the recent definitions of LC presented by different authors.

Many researchers have defined second language LC situation; the intention of this paper is not to present all these definitions. However, in this paper some selected definitions of LC are presented. Buck [1] describes LC is "an inferential process in which the listener constructs meaning through this interaction; and the interpretation of the text is guided and influenced by the context of situation and listener's purpose for listening" [1]. Lynch and Mendelsohn [4] include the primacy and the role applicable to background knowledge in association with meaning construction in their definition. They demonstrate, "listening involves making sense of spoken language, normally accompanied by other sounds and visual input, with the help of our [listeners'] relevant prior knowledge and the context in which we [listeners] are listening" [4]. However, Rost [5] offers very precise definition of LC where Rost maintains, "listening refers to a complex cognitive process that allows a person to understand spoken language" [5].

The coverage of those three definitions is reasonable; therefore, we accept those and present the summary of those definitions.

- LC is an inferential process.
- Listeners interact with the text and interpret.
- Listeners obtain support from the context of the situation.
- Listeners' purposes play a vital role.
- LC comprehension process happens by interpreting acoustic signals with visual inputs.
- LC process requires appropriate background knowledge/prior knowledge.
- LC processes cannot be seen overtly since they are highly complex cognitive processes.

Earlier, LC training in second language profession was viewed as only mastering discrete skills and the focus was only made on teaching of these discrete skills and testing. However, the present view of LC suggests that LC involves interpretative and interactive complex processes within learners' brain and understanding these processes completely is far beyond human knowledge. With this growing awareness, LC teaching receives increasing attention from stakeholders in the current ESL scenario.

II. SETTING AND THE TARGET POPULATION

This study was conducted in the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The subjects for this study were 27 Tamil medium first year undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts. They were all proficient learners in their L1 (Tamil) and were successful students at the school level; they were able to qualify the highly competitive examination of General Certificate of Education – Advanced Level, G.C.E.(A/L), and also progress well in their majors at the university level.

However, it has been observed by many scholars and quoted frequently in academic forums that Tamil medium learners are unable to attain the required level of proficiency in English language even though they have been trained in four language skills namely speaking, listening, reading and writing; therefore, it seems that they are unable to compete in the world of work. Thus, effective learning methods, techniques and strategies have to be recognized and established parallel to the ESL learners' cognitive ability and their language proficiency level in four language skills has to be enhanced. Because of the incessant appeals from various directions, this study made an attempt to gain insights into the LC processes and related major classroom impediments. Anyhow, the present study does not attempt to investigate issues associated with other skills.

In fact, currently, the method of teaching listening and classroom techniques, which are generally employed in our context, are not much beneficial for enhancing LC for the first year Tamil medium, Faculty of Arts, ESL listeners; during an informal discussion, ESL practitioners present various explanations for this kind of incompetency in LC among undergraduates.

In order to find a workable solution in our context, author met the target group and implemented a transactional listening programme. Based on different purposes of LC teaching, it is customary to categorize it into two: transactional (non-reciprocal) listening and interactional (reciprocal) listening.

a) Transactional (non-reciprocal) listening

Transactional listening (generally monologue) is message oriented (for example, lectures, news reading, instructions, presenting weather reports, etc). In transactional listening, the speaker will have long turns. Transactional listening programme is commonly presented in ESL classrooms for one-way listening comprehension training and experience.

b) Interactional (reciprocal) listening

On the other hand, the primary purpose of presenting interactional listening comprehension programme is providing reasonable practice to the listeners to perform sensible social communication (for instance, casual talks, making requests, getting permission, exchanging jokes, etc). Usually, in an interactional listening each interlocutor will have a number of short turns.

During transactional LC programme, some of the major issues relevant to ESL LC have been identified at the beginning by administering questionnaire and conducting informal interviews with the target population. Some of them are presented here:

- Recognizing of vocabulary/word boundaries.
- Recognizing sentences.
- Failure in attention focusing.
- Stressed time features of English language.
- Comprehending the meaning in the passage.
- Intended speakers' meaning.
- Listening and note-taking.
- Incorrect beliefs.
- No or lack of LC practices at the school level.

Some causes for the above LC issues:

- Inadequate practice.
- Mismatching background knowledge.
- Unfamiliar voice.
- Not employing appropriate LC strategies.
- Lack of practice in simultaneous attention focussing in listening and writing.
- Inadequate practice in guess work.

Hence, this study endeavoured to explore the effectiveness of LC with the flowing seven features:

(i). appropriate and adequate practice.
(ii). inclusion of background knowledge.
(iii). familiar voice.
(iv). Strategy training.
(v). Note taking practice.
(vi). Guess work practice.
(vii). Attention focussing practice.

III. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this investigation is employing LC classes with the above seven features and checking the effectiveness periodically. The classroom investigation was performed with an intervention programme for one complete semester, approximately four months or a period of 12 contact weeks with unlimited casual contact hours.

In order to reach this objective, the present research was guided by these two research questions:

(i). What types of LC impediments do the Tamil medium Faculty of Arts undergraduates encounter while listening to transactional listening?
(ii). Will specially designed LC programmes facilitate them to overcome the LC impediments?

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

For this classroom research, a preliminary investigation was made by administering questionnaire and informal discussion to recognize some basic information such as listeners' interest/need, some of the classroom issues, and their background knowledge. The basic data, which have been collected at this level, helped to build up listeners' profile and to design the primary investigation.

The following investigation tools have been employed to examine the situation:

(i). Questionnaire.
(ii). Participant observation.
(iii). Informal/free discussions.
(iv). Retrospective report/verbalization.
(v). Pre and post tests.
(vi). In course assessments with intervals.

As mentioned previously the intervention programme was based on the data, which have been elicited via questionnaire, participant observation and informal discussion conducted at the initial stage of the classroom study. Each round of the intervention programme was incorporated the following steps:

- Implementing some specially selected LC texts/activities to match the listeners' background knowledge.
- Participant observation.
- Verbal report immediately after an activity.
- Informal discussions.

4.1. Major steps before commencing the research

- Identifying the needs and interest of the target group.
- Discovering their background knowledge.
- Recognizing the entry proficiency level.
- Objective setting with sub-skills.
- Selecting the texts and activities (transactional and interactional).
- Designing pre, while and post LC sessions.
- Designing remedial LC programmes.
- Scheming appropriate assessment system.

4.2. Model programme for a unit

A single classroom programme is divided into three sessions (one hour):

4.2.1. Pre-LC

- Motivation, awareness, encouragement and scaffolding.
- Strategy training and activation background knowledge.
- Cognitive level setting with the task.
- Implementation of model task.
- Familiarization.
- Selection of appropriate visuals.
- Listening and taking notes practice.
- Exercise on paying attention.
- Anxiety lowering exercise.
- Establishing purpose and aim.

4.2.2. While LC session

- Managing distractions.
- Maintaining performance checklist.
- Avoiding unnecessary focusing.

4.2.3. Post LC session

- Self/peer evaluation and consolidation
- Remedial treatment and extension activities

5.1. Questionnaire

All our subjects received instruction in Tamil (mother tongue) and they studied ESL from Grade-3 to G.C.E. (A/L) (Grade-13). On the other hand, no subjects were qualified in English language in the G.C.E. (A/L) since they focused their attention on major subjects, which were essential for their university education. Their school level performance related to English language is also not satisfactory; received data confirms it.

5.2. Informal discussion

After the formal discussion, it was recognised that they wanted to learn English to complete their degree since it is compulsory, particularly with the minimal pass level. They were instrumentally motivated. Further, it was recognized that they were highly fed up with learning English grammar and conventional type of English teaching and learning.

5.3. Proficiency level

By putting together information obtained from our initial interaction with the subjects, feedback collected from the regular teachers, the results of our initial diagnostic test, we concluded that the subjects' abilities did not match UTEL level-5 and therefore, their current proficiency level is below UTEL-5. After completing the intervention programme, the UTEL performance indicators have been checked; at the end they have reached the UTEL-5.

5.4. Retrospective report

In order to make the subjects speak immediately after completing every session, the researcher applied two-step procedures: mini warming up stage (two/three questions about his/her family members were asked) and real stage. Our subjects' verbal report clearly evidences that the especially design LC is more appropriate in our situation.

5.5. Observation report

During intervention period, at the initial phase, it was observed that the subjects were unable to recognize and understand unfamiliar vocabulary, and grammatical aspects. They were unable to get the meaning from the context. They were unable to guess the main idea of the unit. Guessing meaning from the context seemed problematic for them. It was not easy for them to understand native accent because English native accent has stress-timed feature, which was new to the Tamil learners. For the non-native English speakers, who have syllable-stressed L1 experience, time-stressed phenomenon of English language became difficult. They faced a large number of difficulties in processing LC, if the text was not interesting to them. If the text had offensive and distressing topics, they could not focus their attention on it. They frequently complained that they could not concentrate on texts and activities completely due to the above psychological issue. Armed with these findings regarding the feelings of the subjects, the author implemented intervention programme.

5.6 Pre-test and post-test

The score difference between pre-test and post-test is significance. However, these differences cannot provide adequate insights. Of course, this result clearly indicates the quantitative variations among achievement levels.

VI. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

As we explained previously the primary mission of the present study was exploring some of the LC issues of the Tamil medium first year undergraduates of the University of Jaffna and identifying appropriate LC programmes to conquer those recognized LC impediments at the beginning.

Our study very clearly evidenced and confirmed that if we implement appropriate specially designed LC training programme to encounter our listeners' LC issues, they will become effective and smart listeners.

Their classroom performances, participatory observational data, feedback/retrospect verbal reports and weekly assessments provided evidences to suggest that our listeners are able to perform well if they are trained with specially designed LC tasks.

From our preliminary investigation, we found that our subjects were all below the benchmark University Test of English Language (UTEL) standards of five (05). At the end, it was proved that appropriately designed LC tasks would help improve and reach the proficiency level to UTEL-5.

Having employed qualitative methodology with the questionnaire, participant observation and retrospective report/verbalization, posttest with periodical internal classroom assessments, this study, at the end, found out that the ESL listeners' comprehension level progressed dramatically when training was provided with specially selected texts with appropriate background knowledge and activities to match our listeners' requirements and cognitive ability to encounter their LC difficulties.

Therefore, our suggestion based on the findings is that a teacher has to consider at least the following steps seriously before conducting the LC programme:

- A careful investigation of LC impediments from our context.
- Specially designed LC material/tasks to overcome those impediments.
- Incorporating listeners' potential and background knowledge.
- In-house LC task designing on par with listeners' cognitive demands and interests.
- Sufficient practice in familiar voice.
- Enough practice in attention focussing and intelligent guessing.
- Adequate practice in listening and note taking simultaneously (two activities at a time).

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