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Implementing Some Simple Strategies to Enhance Learners' Listening Skills

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Abstract

This action research was carried out with an intermediate EFL class of 37 students (19 women and 18 men) at a prestigious public university of a major city in Ecuador. After I gave them the first quiz, I noticed that most of the class performed very poorly on the listening part. I decided to find out what the problem was and what I could do to help my students to improve their listening skills. When I asked the class why they thought they did badly on the listening they came up with different reasons: "The conversations were too difficult; they were confusing; people spoke too quickly; some of the vocabulary words in the conversations were new to us". None of my students were aware of their lack of effective listening strategies. I told my learners I would give them some listening strategies that might help them improve their listening skills. I saw this problem like an opportunity to carry out an action research project to help my students to enhance their listening skills through the implementation of some simple listening strategies such as listening for gist (the main idea); listening for specific information (details); and avoiding being distracted by certain information that was mentioned in the conversations, but that did not pertain to the people or situation stated in the question. The students took 5 more quizzes after the first one and according to the results, their scores on the listening section improved significantly.

Keywords: EFL – English as a Foreign Language, Gist – Main idea, IEP – Intensive English Program.

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Introduction

Among the many difficulties English students face during the learning process, listening is one that really stands out. There are many possible reasons for students' lack of understanding, but their limited exposure to the language and their poor use of listening strategies are probably the most important ones. It is commonly thought that the more exposure one has to the target language, the more one's listening skills will develop. This is true, but not thoroughly. Burns and Joyce (1997) claimed: "In relation to language learning, it is important to remember that learners are unlikely to be able to process language simply by hearing it; they must also be able to make sense of what they hear" (p.136). Developing listening strategies such as guessing from context, understanding the gist, and listening for specific information, is a must if one is to become a good listener. The internet and cable TV provide students with a good language exposure when they have access to them, however, few EFL teachers equip their students with the necessary listening strategies to help them enhance their listening skills to take advantage of those technological breakthroughs and, above all, to be able to communicate effectively in English in the real world. Douglas (2001) stated: "The importance of listening in language learning can hardly be overestimated. Through reception, we internalize linguistic information without which we could not produce language" (p.247). The aims of this action research project were to find out the learners' weaknesses with respect to listening, to raise the students' awareness of using some simple listening strategies and to furnish them with those strategies to help them to improve on their listening skills.

Situation

The university where this action research was done is one of the most prestigious universities in Ecuador. This college has made it compulsory for all its students to study English. The students doing the different engineering degrees have to study six levels of English (Basic A & B, Intermediate A & B, and Advanced A & B). During the vacation period, a lot of students take advantage of their free time to study the Intensive English Programs – IEP, which consist of four hours of class from Monday to Friday (a total of 90 hours). I taught an Intermediate A level in March, 2007 from 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm. This class was made up

of 37 students from different engineering degrees, 19 of them were females and 18 males. The students at this university come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and therefore they also have varied educational backgrounds. Some students come from bilingual schools, whereas others come from public schools; consequently, their levels in English vary a great deal. The students have to take a mid-term test and a final test. They also have a chance to take a make-up test if they fail the course or when they want to improve their grade average. The students had to cover 12 units in the IEP. Every two units, the students took a quiz. The quiz typically consisted of a listening section, grammar, vocabulary, and reading activities. After we had finished the first two units, I gave my students the first quiz. I noticed that one of the sections that had given them the most trouble, besides the grammar, was listening. So I spoke with my students and asked them why they thought they had not done so well on the listening section. They gave me several reasons: "The listening tasks were difficult, they were confusing, people spoke too fast, and some of the words in the conversations were new to us". None of the students were aware of their lack of effective listening strategies. I told my learners I would give them some listening strategies that would help them improve their listening skills. I saw this problem like an opportunity to carry out an action research project to help my students to enhance their listening skills through the implementation of some simple listening strategies.

Focus

Since none of my students said anything about listening strategies, I wondered if they had ever been taught any of these strategies. Apparently, they had not, or at least they were not aware of them. In one class, I explained to them that while listening to a conversation, they did not have to understand every single word. I told them that listening for gist (the main idea) was an effective listening skill they had to develop to better their listening skills. I gave them plenty of practice on this technique. Every time we came across a conversation on their textbook, I had them close their books and listen to the audio CD focusing on the gist first. Of course, I had previously written a question on the whiteboard that focused on the main idea. I also explained to them that besides listening for gist, they too had to learn to listen for

details. Therefore, I wrote three or four questions asking about specific information for every conversation they listened to. Their textbook had specific listening tasks, but I decided to use all the conversations as listening tasks, too. Therefore, I always had them close their books for all the conversations and gave them practice on listening for gist and listening for details.

A third aspect I noticed my students were having trouble with was that they were getting distracted by certain information that was mentioned in the conversations, but that did not correspond to the people or situation stated in the question. This happened because they were not reading the questions carefully enough. Therefore, I pointed out the problem to my students and instructed them to read the questions carefully before they listened to the audio CD. Obviously I had to give them a minute or two to do so. This seemed to work really well. (See conversation sample and questions in the RESPONSE section below).

Response

Once I had detected the problem my students had with listening, I decided to bring it up in class and talk it over with them. As mentioned above, they told me what they considered were the causes of their poor performance on listening in their first quiz. (See table 1 for the scores of the quizzes). The second stage of this project was to raise their awareness of using listening strategies to help them improve their listening skills. This was all new to them. Although they had used some of the strategies before, they were not aware of them. I told them they could improve their listening skills significantly by using the following listening strategies:

1. Listening for gist
2. Listening for details
3. Reading the questions carefully before the listening task. (See conversation sample and questions below).

I devoted a whole one-hour class period to practicing these skills with my class by using different listening activities and analyzing them. When taking a quiz or an exam, the audio CD is played twice only for the students to answer the listening questions. However, when it comes to practicing in class, teachers can play the audio CD as many

times as necessary. After this one-hour practice session, I continued to give them additional listening practice using the strategies in every class. Their listening performance began improving gradually. (See table 1 and figure 1 for performance record on listening sections of quizzes). However, it is important to point out that as Finocchiaro and Bonomo (1973) put it: "These skills are developed over a long period of time in logical, incremental steps".

Sample Conversion of a Quiz and Questions

Marsha: *I love old houses. I like that they have a past, you know, a history of every family that lived there.*

Harry: *But, Marsha, if you buy an old house, you may have to make a lot of repairs to it.*

Marsha: *Repairs? What kind of repairs?*

Harry: *You might have to change the pipes and electrical wiring, or even put in a new heating system.*

Marsha: *Well, that might be true, but just think of how wonderful it would be to live in such a beautiful old place.*

Harry: *But if you stay in your apartment for a few more years, you won't have to worry about moving. You'll have a lot more time to save money for your dream home.*

Question on the quiz

According to Harry, if Marsha stays in her apartment,
___ she may have to make a lot of repairs to it.
___ she'll have more time to save for a house.
___ she won't be able to afford a big old house.

When my students answered this question, most of them (24 out of 37) chose the first option. Harry said that Marsha might have to make a lot of repairs to an old house if she decided to buy one, not if she stayed in her apartment. The right answer is the second one. If Marsha stays in her apartment, she'll have more time to save for a house. If the students had read the question carefully, they might have been able to pick the right answer. This is just one example of the kinds of confusions students have when doing a listening task.

Results

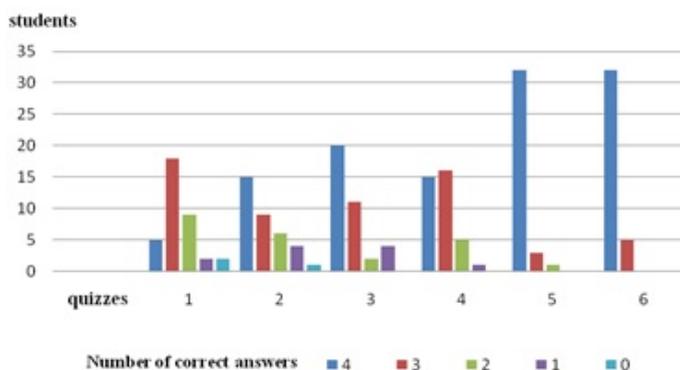
Did the Intermediate A level learners enhance their listening skills by using these simple listening strategies? The answer is a resounding yes. The students did 5 more quizzes after the first one and according to the results, their scores on the listening section of the quizzes improved significantly (See table 1 below). It is worth pointing out that the number of students with 4 correct answers gradually rose from 5 in the first quiz to 32 in quizzes 5 and 6; conversely, the number of students with 2, 1 and 0 correct answers drastically dropped to 0.

Table 1
Performance records on listening sections of quizzes

Quiz*	Ss with 4 correct answers	Ss with 3 correct answers	Ss with 2 correct answers	Ss with 1 correct answer	Ss with 0 correct answers
1	5	18	9	2	2
2	15	9	6	4	1
3	20	11	2	4	0
4	15	16	5	1	0
5	32	3	1	0	0
6	32	5	0	0	0

* All the quizzes had a conversation in the listening section and four questions about it.

Figure 1
Bar chart of students' improvement on their listening in quizzes 2 – 6 compared to quiz 1



Although there is evidence of a significant improvement on the students' scores after they were taught the strategies, as shown on table 1 and figure 1 above, most of the students, 29, felt their listening skills improved only a little during the course; 4 of them thought their skills had improved a lot, and 4 of them considered their listening skills hadn't improved at all. (See action research survey on listening below)

Regarding the question on how much they thought the listening strategies and the additional help (explanations) given by the teacher had helped them, 12 students said that the strategies had helped them a lot; 22 answered they had helped them only a little; and 3 stated that the strategies and explanations hadn't helped them at all. This survey was given to students in order to find out how they felt about listening and whether or not the listening strategies implemented in class had helped them to improve their listening skills.

Action Research Survey on Listening

Your opinions are very important for this study. Please answer the following questions:

1. For me, understanding the listening section in a quiz is ...
a. easy = 2 b. fairly easy = 20 c. difficult = 15

2. The most difficult to understand in a listening activity for me is ...
a. the gist = 5 b. the details = 26 c. both = 5 d. neither = 1
3. I believe that the teacher should play the listening ...
a. only once = 0 b. twice = 14 c. three or more times = 23
4. The listening activities done in class and the help (explanations) given by the teacher have helped me...
a. a lot = 12 b. a little = 22 c. not at all = 3
5. Ever since I started this Intermediate A English level, my listening comprehension skills have improved ...
a. a lot = 4 b. a little = 29 c. not at all = 4

Reflections

This action research fulfilled its three main goals: finding out students' weaknesses in listening, raising their awareness of using effective listening strategies, and improving the students' performance on the listening sections of quizzes. However, I feel that most of us teachers are too concerned with helping our students to succeed in school, but fall short of preparing them to be successful in real life. Too much time and too many efforts are devoted to helping students to make their learning tasks easier for them. However, more emphasis should be given to provide students with the necessary strategies to face the spontaneous and unpredictable situations in everyday life.

We should also encourage our students to seek more exposure opportunities by speaking to native speakers of English or by watching cable TV or using the Internet to tap into these listening strategies in authentic real-life situations

Finally, English teachers should focus more on helping their students develop listening strategies, especially at the lower levels, in order to make them good listeners as well as independent and confident learners.

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