

Fifty Years of the Evolution of Listening Comprehension Skill across Different Pedagogical Perspectives in EFL and ESL Contexts: A Theoretical Review

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Abstract

Chronologically speaking, the view to listening skill has been changed over the decades of development of the phenomenon of second and foreign language learning and teaching, as we go through the language centered methods to learner centered methods and to learning centered methods. In this sense, as we go through the years of the development of this phenomenon, we can see as the methodology and its underlying assumptions and theories has been changed, the view to listening has also been changed. Building on these assumptions, the purpose of the paper is first to review the importance of the listening in different educational and societal settings that has lead to different patterns taken place in the approaches to listening over the past decades. It will then describe how these approaches have provided the basis for listening in different types of pedagogical perspectives as in language-centered methods, learner-centered methods, and learning centered methods. Finally, it will show how this skill has been viewed and encapsulated in socio-cultural and interactionists' accounts of the language.

Keywords: *listening; language-centered methods; learner-centered methods; learning-centered methods*

1. Introduction

Listening to a second or foreign language (L2) has been viewed as the most commonly utilized language skill in normal daily life (Morley 2001; Rost 2001). Based on the research conducted by Paul T. Rankin, former Supervising Director of Research and Adjustment for the Detroit Public Schools on the four communication skills, the average person spends 9% of his time writing, 16% reading, 30% speaking, and almost half, 45%, listening (Iwankovitsch, 2001). Listening is one of central elements of speech processing without which there is no spoken language (Babae, 2017). According to Rost (2001) listening is also interconnected with various areas of investigation and development as with humanities and applied sciences that can be realized in linguistics, education, business and law, with social sciences such as anthropology, political science, psychology and sociology, and simultaneously the processes of listening are relevant to natural sciences such as biology and chemistry, neurology and medicine, and to the formal studies of computer sciences and systems sciences. It has also significant effects on our interactions and relationships with others which can eventually lead to a type of rapport among us and other people (Babae, 2017). As Iwankovitsch (2001), put it, "Everyone wants to be understood and accepted. If one can find listeners who are understanding and accepting, he can experience pleasure from their company and feel closer to them"(p.6). According to Alonso (2012) there is also a vast majority of different kinds of listening in societal and educational contexts such as listening to announcements in stations, airports, listening to the radio, participating in a conversation face-to-face, watching TV, participating in a meeting, seminar or discussion, taking part in a lesson, participating in a telephone conversation among others.

According to Lynch (1998) listening entails a complex process that permits us to understand and interpret speech in real time by utilizing the variety of sources such as phonetic, phonological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic tolls. Given the complexity that underlies the process of listening comprehension, the paramount importance of this skill and the significant application of it in societal, educational and other contexts stated above, it

has been considered differently across the different pedagogical perspectives. As a matter of fact, research conducted over the last decades on the ways of learning and teaching this skill has encapsulated it into different pedagogical perspectives and methods. As a result of this progress the views to listening have been at odds with one another as in different types of methods: language-centered methods, learner centered methods, learning centered methods, and socio-cultural and interactionist-driven methods.

2. Evolution of Listening in Language-centered methods

Up to the end of the 1960s, the importance of listening skill like reading skill in language learning and teaching contexts was one of neglect and was viewed as a passive process with no role in language learning and this belief derived from the environmentalist accounts to language learning, which supposed learning a language as a mechanical process based on a stimulus-response pattern (Usó and Flor, 2006). Language centered methods like Audiolingualism which had derived its underpinning philosophy from environmentalists namely, behaviorists and structuralists approached listening as a passive process requiring learners to respond mechanically to the incoming stimuli. According to Kumaravadivelu (2008) Structural linguists viewed language as a system of systems including several hierarchically related building blocks: phonemes, morphemes, phrases, clauses, and sentences, each with its own internal structure. These subsystems of language were believed to be linearly interrelated in a structured, systematic, and rule-governed way; that is, certain phonemes systematically combine together to construct a morpheme, certain morphemes systematically combine together to form a phrase, and so forth. Secondly, structural linguists treated language as aural-oral, thus highlighting listening and speaking. Speech was considered primary, forming the very basis of language. Structure was believed as being at the center of speech. Thirdly, every language was viewed as unique, each having a numerous number of structural patterns (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). As Kumaravadivelu (2008) continued, like structural linguists, behavioral psychologists had opposition views about mentalist accounts and neglected any justification of human behavior based on emotional feelings or mental processes. They sought a scientifically based approach for analyzing and understanding human behavior. For them, human behavior can be reduced to a series of stimuli that trigger a series of corresponding responses. Consequently, they looked at all learning as a simple mechanism of stimulus, response, and reinforcement. Experience is the basis of all learning, and all learning outcomes can be observed and measured in the changes that occur in behavior (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). According to Brown (1990) in this view to learning, hence listening, listeners were supposed to distinguish and identify the sounds rather than comprehend the meaning of what they are listening to. As Morley (1999, 2001) claimed in this method, the main emphasis was on pronunciation and memorization of prefabricated patterns and replication of conversations. Therefore, according to Usó and Flor (2006), in this method of language teaching, the linguistic accounts were taken into consideration and listeners were expected to listen to the artificial linguistic patterns in isolation out of their context of use. However in this view, the higher stages cognitive mechanisms that affect listening comprehension were neglected (Morley, 2001).

3. Evolution of Listening in Learner-centered Methods

By the late 1960s, behaviorists' view to listening had been criticized by many scholars as the new schools of thought begun to play roles on the domain of second language learning and teaching. That was in this time that learner centered methods (e.g. Communicative Language Teaching) begun to emerge. These schools were cognitive psychology with its overarching branches of linguistics named psycholinguistics and Chomsky's (1957, 1965) innatist views to language. Chomsky's focus and emphasis on innate and mentalist capabilities which enable language learning stimulated many researchers. They began to approach listening as a dynamic process rather than mechanical and artificial procedure (Usó and Flor, 2006). Therefore the shift was from memorization to comprehension. According to Peterson and Rost (2001) the primary step in language acquisition was comprehension and consequently listening was an indispensable requirement in receiving input and changing it to intake. In the following years, during (1970-1980), listening was accepted as an indispensable requirement in language learning based on the beliefs that were drawn from Chomsky's views, cognitive psychology and psycholinguistic researches. It was in that period that listening hit the spotlight and announced its significant importance with James Asher's (1977) work on total physical response which highlighted the role of listening at the first stages of learning, having learners to listen to great amount of speech for the purpose of encouraging them to respond orally (Brown, 2007). In the early 1970s also some of Asher's co-workers (Nord, 1975; Postovsky, 1974; and Winitz and Reeds, 1975 cited in Rost, 1990) proposed methodologies for language teaching and learning which highlighted the importance of listening.

4. Evolution of Listening in Learning-centered Methods

During 1980, some scholars (Witnez, 1981; Krashen & Terrel, 1983; Ommaggo, 1986; Probhu, 1987; Lewis, 1993; Willis, 1990 and Legutke & Thomas, 1991 cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2008) focused on the process of language learning that consequently led to the advent of learning centered methods. One of the most prominent learning centered methods that focused on listening was Krashen's (1983) natural approach based on comprehensible input which had derived its underpinning philosophies and principles from second language acquisition. He gave prominent importance to the silent period during which learners must listen to the comprehensible input until they were ready to speak under the relaxed and stress-free conditions. As a matter of fact he considered receptive skills namely, listening and reading as preliminary and significant factors in the process of second language learning. Similarly, the other prominent learning-centered method that focused on comprehension was Prabhu's (1987 cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2008) communicational approach. In his approach, Prabhu highlighted the importance of comprehension over production in terms of being safe and secure activity, not requiring language learner to produce output and allowing the learner to be imprecise and control the process of comprehension which is readily adjustable. Taking account of the comprehension as a preliminary and significant condition for language learning, learning centered methods considered listening as an important requirement in their meaning focused input modification which was best realized in task based language teaching.

5. Evolution of Listening in the Interactionist-driven Methods

During the last decades integrationist accounts such as social, cultural and contextual factors has been thought to have a paramount importance on listening comprehension. Researchers have taken an integrationist approach to the listening and considered listening skill as a comprehension of whole discourse rather than isolated sentences. Under such an approach, Rost (2001) emphasized the responsibility of listeners as a comprehension of intended meaning rather than paying attention to the formal structures of the sentences. In a similar token and with emphasizing contextual factors, Rumelhart's (1980) schema theory has also had important implications for listening comprehension. Having had two types of schemata namely content and formal schemata, this theory has highlighted the contextual and textual factors in the process of listening comprehension. In fact, integrationist view to listening has dealt with issues including social factors such as speaker's status and roles, the time and place of the conversation, the topic being discussed and the other factors making listening between the lines possible. As a result of integrationist's assumptions to listening, interactive approach to listening has been proposed which train learners to pursue a decoding, critical-thinking, speaking model, having them to primarily decode the information they listen, respond to it by processing it critically, and finally generate a proper output (Usó and Flor, 2006).

In more recent research, some other factors have been thought to have considerable importance in the process of listening. Flowerdew and Miller (2005) highlighted the kinds of meaning in comprehension of spoken discourse. In these views, listeners are expected to be familiar with different kinds of genres to extract specific intended meaning. In another study the importance of first language has been highlighted. Vandergrift (2006) claimed that one of the requirements of being a good listener in the process of second language acquisition is being a good listener in first language. Further, the research has directed its attention to the strategic factors and strategies-based instruction in listening comprehension (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Hinkel, 2006; Mendelsohn, 1998; Rost, 2005; Vandergrift, 2003, 2004 cited in Brown 2007). In fact these studies emphasized the use of the appropriate strategies in the process of listening comprehension, having significant implications for instructors and listeners to use available time and resources effectively for the purpose of the effective listening comprehension.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the view to listening has been changed as the skill evolved in the process of the evolution of second language learning and teaching. Once upon a time listening to isolated sentences and repetition of them was of paramount importance. In this era, listening was regarded as a passive skill and perceived as comprehension of stimulus-response connections. However, drawbacks in undermining mentalistic accounts in this era led to the emergence of considering the cognitive factors affecting the listening processes that had received considerable attention. Bottom-up-oriented strategies of listening at the expense of top down-oriented processes were thought to enhance comprehension of the incoming stimuli by triggering cognitive processes. Consequently, the social, cultural and contextual factors affecting the listening comprehension overlooked by cognitivists have been thought to have a significant role in the process of listening comprehension leading to the socioculturally-driven view and

discourse-related accounts to listening comprehension. As can be perceived, the view to listening have been changed along with the change in the pedagogical perspectives and the psychological and theoretical assumptions upon which these perspectives have been rooted and in this sense, it seems that the changes in the views to listening were indispensable. However, nowadays whatever the view to listening is, the paramount importance of listening is obvious in providing input being indispensable for language acquisition. Now this argument can be proved through so-called input-related theories and arguments in second language acquisition science.

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