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e-mail: isalatik62@gmail.com

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Iryna Salata,

State Institution of Higher Education «Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University», Kryvyi Rih

SOME IDEAS ON LISTENING PRACTICE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

In this article the author touches upon some issues concerning listening practice in the English classroom, which are discussed in research papers by many scholars and practitioners throughout the world. Taking into consideration the widely-discussed problems of listening practice and being guided by her own professional practice as an English teacher the author tries to find the appropriate ways of solving some problems concerning listening: how to select and fully exploit materials for listening comprehensive activities, how to integrate listening skills into other linguistic skills, what the most reasonable amount of time should be spent on listening itself, what activities to use to help students to focus on listening objectives.

This article should help English teachers reconsider how we think about listening materials, listening tasks and applying appropriate teaching methods and techniques.

Key words: *listening practice, audio materials, listening comprehensive activities, integration of listening skills into other linguistic skills, teaching methods and techniques.*

Салата Ірина Анатоліївна,

Державний вищий навчальний заклад «Криворізький державний педагогічний університет», м. Кривий Ріг.

ДО ПРОБЛЕМИ ПРАКТИКИ АУДІОВАННЯ У ПРОЦЕСІ ВИКЛАДАННЯ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ

У статті розглянуто деякі питання стосовно практики аудіювання на заняттях з англійської мови, які обговорюються багатьма вченими та викладачами з різних країн. Взявши до уваги проблеми аудіювання, які широко дискутуються, та спираючись на власний досвід викладачів англійської мови, авторка цієї статті намагається знайти способи вирішення проблем, а саме: як відібрати та в повній мірі використовувати аудіо матеріали, як інтегрувати навички аудіювання в інші лінгвістичні навички, скільки часу варто затрачати на саме аудіювання, а також які види роботи допоможуть студентам сконцентруватися на розвитку навичок розуміння іноземної мови.

Ключові слова: *аудіювання, аудіо матеріали, інтегрування навичок аудіювання в інші лінгвістичні навички, методи та прийоми викладання.*

Салата Ірина Анатольевна,

Государственное высшее учебное заведение «Криворожский государственный педагогический университет», г. Кривой Рог

К ПРОБЛЕМЕ ПРАКТИКИ АУДИРОВАНИЯ В ПРОЦЕССЕ ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА

В статье рассматриваются некоторые вопросы, касающиеся практики аудирования на занятиях по английскому языку, которые обсуждаются многими учеными и практикующими преподавателями из разных стран. Приняв во внимание широко обсуждаемые проблемы аудирования и опираясь на собственный опыт преподавания английского языка, автор этой статьи пытается найти подходящие способы решения, а именно: как отобрать и в полной мере использовать аудио материалы, как интегрировать навыки аудирования в другие лингвистические навыки, сколько времени должно длиться само прослушивание аудио материала, а также какие виды работы помогут студентам сконцентрироваться именно на целях развития навыков понимания иностранной речи.

Ключевые слова: *аудирование, аудио материалы, интегрирование навыков аудирования в другие лингвистические навыки, методы и приемы преподавания.*

The author of this article conducted a poll of 34 English teachers and 30 graduate students of pedagogical university, i. d. future English teachers, who have already had a school practice, to find out which of the four activities – reading, writing, speaking or listening – causes the greatest difficulty in teaching English as a foreign language. 73 % of interviewees named listening.

Further inquiries showed the problems which most teachers face with: the 1st – teachers themselves value grammar, vocabulary, reading and speaking over listening, the 2nd – they claim the fast spontaneous speech is too difficult for learners, the 3^d – lack of listening materials, the 4th – too noisy and crowded classrooms, the 5th – lack of equipment.

This has led me to reflect on my own professional practice as an English teacher and try to find the appropriate ways of solving some problems concerning listening: how to select and fully exploit materials for listening comprehensive activities, how to integrate listening skills into other linguistic skills, how to motivate students to focus on listening objectives.

I'd like this article to help English teachers reconsider how we think about listening materials, listening tasks and applying appropriate teaching methods and techniques.

Speaking about skills integration in language learning we should remember that Oxford R. compared this one with a tapestry in which each linguistic skill is one of the threads that makes up a larger whole. And if learners want to get a real sense of a foreign language, they should see how all these threads complement each other in the social phenomenon which is called communication.

Language skills may also be compared with the channels through which communication can travel, and the more routes the language learners take, the better their knowledge of the language could be [9]. So, in other words, you can't be a good speaker if you

are not a good listener. As well as you won't be able to write well if you aren't a good reader. That's why one of the ways to integrate as many skills as possible is to combine different activities.

For instance, it may be the combination of listening cloze with info-gap activity as described by Vargas J. in his article how to use this hybrid activity to exploit listening materials. I sometimes use this type of activity at my lessons and can confirm Vargas's thought that combining listening cloze with info-gap helps to integrate the four macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing [13].

The structure of a classic listening lesson looks like this: pre-listening tasks – usually a teacher starts with warm-up questions on the topic of listening to the class, then introduces a listening comprehensive activity, for example, a short conversation of pairs of students on the topic of listening, it also may be a drill activity that models vocabulary or an important grammatical structure, the usage of pictures or photos relating to the topic or situation in listening that students can guess or predict what they will hear; while-listening tasks – students get a handout and have to tick True/False statements or fill the gaps with missing words; post-listening tasks – a variety of activities: to answer the follow-up questions, to make up their own questions on the audio text, to discuss the ideas in the text, etc.

If we have a look at the time spent on each of these types of tasks, the shortest one is usually spent on while-listening activity, i.e. listening itself. Some minutes of listening are usually supported by much longer time of not-listening activities. It might be argued that the other tasks support the central listening segment. But these tasks don't target the listening practice itself. And here I have to agree with McCaughey who wonders what a teacher will do if students did not understand a recorded speech, how they will do the while-listening and post-listening tasks. There is no provision for that. In this case a teacher has to take verbal answers from volunteers and move on. A teacher can't exactly identify who understood the text and help those who didn't [8, p. 3].

From proposed textbooks it is clearly seen that pre-listening and post-listening time dominates at the classic listening lesson. So if our goal is to increase listening practice what should be the answer to the question «How much preparation is sufficient for a very short listening period?» The answer should be «Very little».

A listening activity at the lesson usually follows the pattern like this: students listen to the whole audio text and then fulfil comprehension tasks given by the teacher. This model is based on the same principal as we use a written text for reading comprehension: firstly, read the text; secondly, answer the questions on the text. But a listening text unlike a written word doesn't remain still before students' eyes, it moves past students' ears in real time, so a student doesn't have an opportunity to move back, to listen once again on his/her own, to look up a word in the dictionary. That's why answering comprehension questions after an audio is mostly a test of memory. As Field mentions, the focus is on outcome, on product rather than process, and ignores the specific difficulties students may have experienced during the actual listening phase [4, p. 111].

Here we have to agree with Rost who states that specific listening goals can address difficulties of understanding, as they occur, and deal with specific differences in oral and written language like variable accent, different speed, background noise, pauses, false starts and hesitations [10, p. 171]. Listeners' attention should also be drawn to reduced forms, leaving off endings, blending sounds, weak forms of words, assimilation, etc. [1].

Listeners should be aware that one and the same word may be pronounced differently by different speakers. To point out all these phenomena of a spoken language and thus let students discover them under the teacher's guidance is the best way towards understanding authentic speech.

This is supported by Buck's words that «when second-language learners learn some new element of a language, at first they have to pay conscious attention and think about it; it takes time, and their use of it is slow. But as the new element becomes more familiar, they process it faster, with less thought, until eventually the processing of that element becomes completely automatic» [2, p. 7].

To reach this goal at my lessons I often use listening to a single-sentence text which contains one or some pronunciation phenomena with further tasks: either to write down this whole phrase or to fill in the gaps, for example, with a reduced form or with a missing word which sounds not the way it looks in writing. The plus of this single-sentence listening is as it is very short, students may listen to it many times, not one or two as usually till they understand it correctly.

The other advantages of short-time listening are supported by McCaughey who states that short listening periods mean short activities; short activities require little preparation; there is no need to make handouts as a teacher can write the sentence with gaps on the board; it is easy to squeeze short listening activities into the class work. Besides, short audio takes low risks: if it goes wrong little harm will be done [8, p. 9].

How much time exactly should listening last? Lewis and Hill limit the concentration of low-level students to about 20 seconds [7]. While Rost reminds us that «well-known limitations to short-term memory occur after 60 to 90 seconds of listening» [10, p. 145]. According to Scrivener, two-minutes of recorded material is enough to provide a lot of listening work [11, p. 176].

Short-time listening activities may be used at any level of learners' language knowledge. But the higher the level, the faster and more difficult the audio should be, the more complex vocabulary it should contain.

One more point to which I'd like to draw attention concerns pre-listening task, namely, making prediction. According to Graham's opinion it can rather hamper than help aural comprehension [6, p. 65].

Gianfranco Conti in his listening-research findings mentions that Graham considers that making prediction may be harmful for understanding an audio text properly: «in many instances predictions proved to be unhelpful; for example, by leading learners to imagine hearing the predicted word even if it did not occur, and then drawing erroneous conclusions about the passage as a whole; or focusing so much on trying to hear the predicted items that the overall sense of the passage was ignored. Problems also arose because learners failed to verify whether their predictions were correct or not, possibly because they had never been taught» [3].

This usually occurs with the students of lower level knowledge of the foreign language. But from my own teaching practice I can say that predictions may be very helpful.

First of all students should be provided with worksheets which help them predict the type of language they will hear. It may be pictures that relate to the topic or situation in a listening task. Of course, some time should be spent on checking these predictions.

A great number of research papers proved that «metacognitive knowledge – self-knowledge, task knowledge, planning, self-monitoring and evaluation – plays an important role in the listening process, especially at less advanced level» [3].

For example, Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari propose to improve the listening skills of lower proficiency learners using a metacognitive instruction programme for listening which consists of «a pedagogical cycle» [12, p. 472].

This means that before listening students get a written variant of the audio text where individual words or parts of the text are deleted. A teacher asks students to read the text and to try to fill in the missing words. Using the context helps students to predict the words that they might hear. A pair work and class discussion helps students observe difficulties and verify their choice. Vandergrift mentions that a subsequent listening to the text promotes selective attention (planning) and verification of hypotheses (monitoring), discussing the merits of the decisions made will promote the strategy of evaluation. He reported that learners of all proficiency levels showed greater improvement in the metacognitive strategies of planning, evaluation and problem-solving [12].

A word of caution should be said here: such type of work requires a rather long time of training before substantial results will be reached and may not be so successful with lower proficiency students.

One more significant issue, which I'd like to touch upon, is what type of listening material is better to use in the classroom – of native speakers or non-native speakers.

In his research Graddol found out that even 14 years ago 74% of 750 million international travellers were non-native English speakers travelling to non-English-speaking countries. That's why if students travel, they are more likely to communicate with L2 English speakers than native English speakers [5].

So there is no need to use at the lesson only the native English models of speech. Besides, the English language itself doesn't have a single correct variant; it has a variety of accents and dialects. So we think that teachers should increase a number of listening materials taken from non-native-speaking sources and this non-native English speech may be as authentic as native English speech.

These sources may be quite different, for example, BBC and CNN news, in which students can hear reporters from different countries of South America, South-Eastern Asia and Arabian countries; various radio commercials, advertisements, TV shops, etc. Nowadays the Internet provides with a great variety of audio sources, so there is no problem for teachers to find an appropriate material for listening either of native-speaking or non-native-speaking origin.

To sum up, we hope that the ideas on listening practice expressed in this article will be useful for English teachers when they design lessons for developing students' listening comprehension skills. English teachers should always bear in mind that listening practice will be really successful if students are constantly motivated to improve their listening skills.

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