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Listening Comprehension as a Key Component  
towards the Success of Foreign Language Learning

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## **Listening Comprehension as a Key Component towards the Success of Foreign Language Learning**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this article is to clarify the importance of using listening comprehension to facilitate the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. The approaches underlying the trends supporting listening comprehension teaching and learning, coupled with the literature review point to the development of listening skills as a sure way of smooth foreign language learning. The success of developing listening comprehension skills is hedged on involvement of the learner in well thought out activities by the teacher, their effort and practice, as well as the use of ICT. Researchers in the study exhibit components of oral speech communication which provides the basis for development of other speech aspects and cognitive development. Those findings suggest that oral speech communication is a prerequisite for language acquisition.

**Keywords:** *listening comprehension, streams, technologies, communicative competence*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teaching and learning has assumed contemporary interest for decades with researchers of foreign language always finding new ways and improving on old ones to facilitate teaching and learning. Improving listening comprehension skills is one of the sure ways of helping to develop and improve communicative competence of foreign language learners.

Listening comprehension is one of the most important components of oral speech communication which provides the basis for development of other speech aspects and cognitive development. It is a prerequisite for language acquisition. The first kind of speech activity a child develops is the listening comprehension. This takes the better part of the growing child to acquire. If one has difficulties in understanding what another person is saying in a foreign language, it cannot be said that, they have a good command of a foreign language and therefore, they cannot use it as a means of communication. This argument has been supported by (Masalimova, Porcheskua & Liakhnovitch2016).

According to Kurita (2012), learners may find listening comprehension skill difficult to learn due to non-exposure to the rudiments and this requires teachers to change their listening exercises into more effective ones. The development of listening comprehension skill helps learners to succeed in language learning and increase their comprehensible input. Since learners' self-confidence in listening comprehension can be increased, they are motivated to have access to spoken foreign language like conversations with native speakers Ahmadi (2016). It is important to mention that developing listening comprehension skills is not only dependent on listening to native speakers but also to non-native speakers of the said foreign language. This is because, the focus is on listening for thoughts, feelings, and intentions (Pourhossein, Gilakjani & Ahmadi 2011). To do this therefore, there is the need for active involvement, effort and practice.

According to Cuq (2003), the term "comprehension" is the skill resulting from the implementation of cognitive processes; this allows the learner to access the meaning of a text that he or she is listening to (oral comprehension) or reading (written comprehension). The term "oral", is a message made orally or transmitted by voice. (Petit Larousse 2008).Kramsch (1992) goes even further by redefining comprehension according to the context, an essential tool for reaching meaning. Classroom understanding for him, is based on the ability of participants to define, construct and manipulate a common context of interaction.

Oral comprehension is a skill that aims to progressively help the learner acquire strategies for listening and understanding oral statements. On the contrary, it is a question of training our learners to become more self-confident and more autonomous in learning a language. Listening comprehension allows the learner to reinvest, to practice what they have learned inside and outside the classroom, to make hypotheses about what they have listened to and understood, as in their mother tongue. In a communicative approach, one necessarily begins by understanding before producing. Oral comprehension is probably the first skill dealt with in lesson zero (Lesson zero is the first moment of encounter between the teacher and the learner of the foreign or second language: negotiating the learning contract, getting to know each other and getting to know the target language (Kokroko, 2017)

Using ICT as a pathway, offers a valuable way of contextualising and introducing new language through listening comprehension, making it meaningful and memorable. These are associated

with feelings and memories, as they are distinctive manifestations of cultural values and perceptions (Brett 1995; Felix 1995; Hoven 1999). Brett (1995); (Fidelman, (1997), Gassin, (1992); Hurley (1992) "ICT applications for foreign language learning, can provide a more realistic picture of the new language and culture in the classroom, including not only linguistic but also paralinguistic features such as body language, gestures, prosody etc... which help to convey meaning to learners, reiterate the positive contributions that ICT adds to the acquisition of a foreign or second language. Listening to a story through access to audio files motivates and strengthens the competences to better acquire the comprehension of the new language.

Fraser et al 1963; McNeil 1970; Dulay et al 1982 in their writings refer to listening comprehension as a preferred pathway to foreign or second language acquisition. Based on this vision, we seek to highlight the current role that listening comprehension plays in foreign language acquisition.

The major concept of this study is "oral comprehension". We, therefore, sought to highlight the inescapable contribution made by many researchers towards the development of 'listening comprehension' skill of a foreign language, such as French. On the first level, we would review past and recent studies on listening comprehension in the teaching/learning of a foreign language. We would also collect experiences with new technologies by other researchers, more specifically, appreciate the contributions of new technologies to the teaching of listening comprehension and, on the other hand, briefly describe the main trends in the learning of listening comprehension (pedagogical approaches) that have been adopted mainly by teachers to improve the listening comprehension to facilitate the learning of a foreign language.

## **2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 The main trends providing the linguistic basis for teaching listening comprehension**

Listening, according to Masalimova et al., (2016), involves both bottom-up and top-down perception processes and requires the use of non-linguistic as well as linguistic knowledge. The holistic approach to the description of the process of speech perception presumes revealing the features of a speech signal which allow to identify the perceived speech units as integral units. The listener uses and integrates information at different levels in the speech perception process. Kasevich (2010) on his part, categorised these levels of speech perception into: psychoacoustic (perception of physical characteristics of a speech signal), linguistic (phonetic, lexical, syntactical, and semantical representation of a speech signal) and cognitive (making information hypothesis about the structure of a speech sound). For foreign language learners it is necessary to train listening comprehension at the linguistic level which is represented as a system of models of linguistic units (Masalimova et al., 2016).

Germain (1993), postulates that oral comprehension has never been the desired aptitude for acquiring a foreign language for the last fifty years. However, some twenty years ago, researchers began to give an important place to the teaching of oral comprehension. He identified landmark work that has attempted to give scientific dimensions to language teaching and distinguishes three major trends in the teaching of oral comprehension: an "integrated" stream, a "linguistic" stream, and a "psychological" stream. We briefly describe the streams according to Germain, in order to clarify our approach.

The *integrated stream*; This stream group's together methods or approaches that give equal importance to the didactics of listening comprehension. Audio-oral (listening and speaking) approaches as well as the Structuro-Global Audio-Visual (SGAV) methodology, developed in France in the 1960s, are part of it. SGAV methodology emphasized the presentation of linguistic material in situation and the physical and affective participation of language learners in communicative interaction without the direct teaching of linguistic rules. In this case, priority is given to teaching the spoken word, but the practice is oriented towards structure, autonomy and imitation.

The *language stream*; this brings together approaches that focus on the nature of language. In this stream are the communicative approach and the situational approach. It gives priority to the oral but practices-oriented towards structure, automatism and imitation. Language becomes an instrument of social interaction and a practice oriented towards real exchanges and the negotiation of meaning. Comprehension is paramount in this process.

The *psychological stream*; this is a group of methods that are based on psychological theory: Curran's community method, Gattegno's silence method and Krashen-Terrell's natural approach (1983) are some of its methods. In other words, the skills receptive to practical production are oriented towards understanding. Therefore, 'Understanding' in learning, forms the first step of the pedagogical activity. The focus is on the learner and the learning process. At various levels, all the approaches mentioned under the main streams give importance to listening comprehension. We describe one approach underlying each stream of learning to better identify their contribution to the development of the 'listening comprehension' skill.

## **2.2. Approaches underlying the streams as indicated by Germain.**

### **2.2.1 The audio-oral method**

The audio-oral method was conceived in 1965. The method is based on Bloomfield's structuralist model. It provided a new orientation which has replaced the grammar-translation approach and which would subsequently be extended to general language teaching. During the Chomskyan revolution, he attacked the taxonomic aspect of structural linguistics by criticising it for neglecting the importance of meaning. The focus on "*meaning*", allow us to recognise the importance of "*understanding*" in this work.

### **2.2.2 The communicative method**

Germain (1993), Richard and Rodgers (1986) are at the origin of the communicative method. According to Germain, the work of Hymes (1971) on the situational method led the authors of this method to rethink language didactics. Richard and Rodgers (1986) believe that language is an instrument of communication and especially of social interaction. From this perspective, knowing how to communicate would mean preparing the learner for exchanges with native speakers.

### **2.2.3 Natural method**

The Natural Approach is the result of a collaboration between a Spanish language teacher, Terrel, and a researcher, Krashen (1983). The aim of the method, which is intended for beginners, is to put understanding at the forefront. Receptive skills are considered here as



prerequisites for production: "Language acquisition would be analogous to the way a child understands his L1 (mother tongue) in a natural way" Germain (1993).

Having read the contributions of past and present researchers in the short term, we will reflect the perspectives of researchers on teaching listening comprehension through new technologies.

### **2.3 Researchers' perspectives**

Krashen (1982) has advanced the thinking on the subject by suggesting that listening comprehension is a fundamental skill in language learning. Compain et al (1995) argue that a positive attitude towards comprehension-oriented courses undoubtedly requires the development of an active and interactive pedagogy that encourages the learner to integrate new knowledge. They propose the acquisition of automatisms and create links between the cognitive and affective aspects of language learning.

Bertocchini and Costanzo (2011), on their part, include the notion of oral comprehension in classroom practices. According to them, it is an integral part of learning a foreign language. Listening comprehension leads learners to immerse themselves in the oral forms of the most common communicative situations of everyday life.

From the perspective of researchers, we have captured views on the value of oral comprehension in foreign language teaching/learning. In the next sub-chapter, we focus on the literature of researchers on the impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) on the teaching of comprehension.

## **3. IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES**

Following the researchers' perspectives, new technologies could become allies by further motivating the learner and making him or her an active player ready to take charge of his or her learning. Initial evidence confirmed by work conducted at the University of Ottawa by (Corbeil and Thérien, 1992); Courchêne, (1992) and Paribakht & Raymond (1992), has convincingly demonstrated the importance of understanding and a skill that is now seen by many researchers as a necessary path for learning foreign languages.

a/ As Bissaillon (1998) points out, oral comprehension is surely one of the language skills in which new technologies have an important role to play because of the sound and visual potential they possess. Baltova (1994) examined a group of language students in a classroom in the process of oral comprehension. Half of the learners listened to a video and sound excerpt in French. Following a comparison of comprehension performance, it was noted that this comprehension activity conducted improved the overall comprehension of a type of text, in this case, a narrative text. This research also showed that media tools had undeniable advantages with regard to affective factors (such as reducing the degree of anxiety when faced with a difficult text).

b/ According to Herron et al., (1995), in another experiment conducted with 28 Anglophones enrolled in French courses at Oxford College, two groups were formed: a control group and an experimental group. The experimental group took a course based on the French in Action method (video context) while the control group used a classic textbook. A comparison of the

results obtained in the post-test showed that the experimental group had greatly improved its oral comprehension.

c/ Herron and Hanley (1992), conducted an experiment with 57 students in French as a foreign language, showing that the video document was, among other things, a facilitating element for the appropriation of a foreign culture as well. And visual clues are also a good way to improve comprehension of texts or documents read immediately after viewing. Rubin (1994), maintains that the success of video documents also depends on the editing of the clear, talking heads image. This is what can stimulate attention while providing useful information well suited to their purpose.

To conclude this section, we would like to point out that, having put out the above comparative studies on listening comprehension, we have identified and noted other remarks that are worth mentioning. Researchers Corder (1967); Loftus (1975), believe that oral comprehension is one of the language skills essential for the learning of a foreign language.

First, according to Corder (1967), generalized teaching practices promote confusion between comprehension and expression. The idea that comprehension is a prerequisite for expression is often expressed, a remark that seems quite accurate and that the French adage "bons auditeurs sont les bons locuteurs" (good listeners are good speakers) confirms this.

Loftus (1975), Findahl & Hoijer (1982) note that the steps involved in completing a comprehension task involve cognitive effort, which affects how the text is understood and what is actually retained and reported by the learner in the task. They point out that the event reported, and often reconstructed in relation to lived experiences, is not always a faithful and significant image of the set of data that the listener had initially perceived.

In addition, other promising areas of research, including the works of Spada & Lightbown (1989); Wesche et al. (1994), confirm that exposing learners to foreign language listening comprehension activities can influence acquisition by giving them the opportunity to improve their oral expression, to acquire a certain degree of autonomy in their learning, and to be able to understand and interpret the foreign culture better in its own reality. Certainly, Corder (1967), postulates that listening comprehension is central to the progress in language learning, the language elements in the environment, including the processing and integration of these elements, are entered in the environment. Teaching oral comprehension through texts with visual support is a promising way to improve it.

The views of the researchers we have highlighted on the effectiveness of listening comprehension in the acquisition of a foreign language are not to be disputed in relation to the results of our own research. The detailed results available in the methodology of work in our particular working condition, confirms the position of the researchers.

#### **4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

In this research, we reviewed a significant portion of the literature that provides an overview on key concepts covering different domains as spelt out earlier: (ICT integration and impact, representation, and listening comprehension). On the first level, the review of the literature highlights the intentions and potential benefits of integrating new technologies into teachers' pedagogic practices which can only be realized, if the trainers concerned are aware of their

importance and specific contribution to teaching and learning of a foreign language. The teachers should demonstrate some important level of commitment and consciousness in adopting technological strategies as witnessed in the research to increase their input. As Perrenoud (1998) points out, trainers should not make ICT optional, superfluous activities *to be done when there is time*. On the contrary, they should adopt an attitude of monitoring *the cultural, sociological, pedagogical and didactic aspects, in order to understand what the school, its audiences and its programmes will be made of tomorrow*.

The researchers believe that for learners to improve their listening skill, they should be assisted to practice it sufficiently in the target language. They should also be provided with appropriate materials and activities in which they can learn how to understand the targeted language. Karsenti, Peraya & Viens (2002), emphasize the growing place of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in today's society which compels us to revise the training programs of almost all professions in order to take into account the new training requirements, new tools, new work strategies and new roles that we would be called upon to play in the emerging more resourceful society, particularly in Africa.

Furthermore, there is a call on teachers to provide the environment for learners to listen to native and non-native speakers of a target foreign language. In other words create an immersion conditions that allows contact with native speakers. That would enable learners develop adequate listening skills which will translate into the smooth learning of the said foreign language.

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