

## Brushing up your listening skills checklist

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### **Abstract**

This article aims at sharing some ideas concerning listening strategies focusing on reducing the burden listening comprehension may cause. It is a project developed with pre-intermediate students and its primary goal was to engage learners into mastering listening strategies by combining as many sub-skills as possible in order to succeed. By delving into authors like Beare; Celce-Murcia; Ur; White; among others we have created a listening checklist to raise their perceptions towards what they had to pay attention to in order to make the best of the listening and as a result, successfully process spoken language and improve their communicative competence.

**keywords:** Strategies development. Sub-skills. Listening.

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## Aperfeiçoando suas habilidades auditivas

### Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo compartilhar algumas ideias sobre estratégias de compreensão auditiva focada em reduzir o fardo que esse tipo de compreensão pode causar. É um projeto desenvolvido com alunos pré-intermediários e seu principal objetivo foi envolver os alunos em atividades com o objetivo de dominar estratégias de escuta, combinando o maior número possível de sub-estratégias para ter sucesso. Ao mergulhar em autores como Beare; Celce-Murcia; Ur; Branco, entre outros, criamos uma lista de verificação para elevar suas percepções para o que eles tinham que prestar atenção, a fim de fazer o melhor da escuta e, como resultado, processar com sucesso a linguagem falada e melhorar sua competência comunicativa.

**Palavras-chave:** estratégias de desenvolvimento. Sub-estratégias. Compreensão auditiva.

## Aperfeiçoando sus habilidades de escucha

### Resumo

Este artículo tiene como objetivo compartir algunas ideas sobre estrategias para escuchar centradas en reducir la carga que esta clase de comprensión puede causar. Es un proyecto desarrollado con los estudiantes de pre-intermedios y su principal objetivo fue involucrar a los estudiantes en actividades con objetivo dominar estrategias para escuchar, que combina el mayor número posible de sub-estrategias para tener éxito. Cuando se bucea en autores como Beare; Celce-Murcia; Ur; Blanco, entre otros, han creado una lista de comprobación para crear a sus percepciones de lo que tenían que prestar atención con el fin de hacer el mejor de escucha y, como resultado, procesar correctamente la lengua hablada y mejorar su competencia comunicativa.

**Palabras clave:** estrategias de desarrollo. Sub-estrategias. Escucha.

## Introduction

Over the last three decades, approximately, there has been a great effort in order to understand both the implications and the aspects of language teaching/learning. Therefore, a great number of studies have been carried out and led to substantial changes in terms of educational theories and the way language and learning are perceived. As a result, we have watched the development of teachers' practices in the language classrooms.

As Richards (1999) states "teaching is a complex, multi-dimensional activity". So, in order to make the suitable decisions, teachers must be aware of the different dimensions that underlie both teaching and learning processes. As well as, bear in mind that the learners' needs is the central core of our language classrooms and based on that assumption, we should seek and select effective strategies so that we could meet our students' learning purposes and needs.

As teachers we happen to deal with different learning styles, particular needs and difficulties. A great deal of what goes on in learning is most of the times unknown or yet to be revealed by our students. Learning their purpose and listening to their most common complaints in terms of language difficulties, will enable us to motivate students, adapt tasks and create a more favorable/ hospitable and less threatening classroom environment so that learning can take place.

The idea of starting this project over came from both observing and dealing with pre-intermediate students' difficulties concerning listening. Their reactions during listening tasks have told us a lot about their assumptions. Some of them just pretended they were listening, others absolutely panicked or froze and that would cause them to undergo an inevitable feeling of frustration and consequent lack of motivation to, at least, give the activity a try.

When asked they would constantly complain about the fact that they would have to deal with so much unknown information, and all that happening so fast that it would

cause them to get lost and give it up at once, which would provoke listening task outcomes become a complete failure or even worse listening ends up becoming subject to misconceptions.

That scenario aroused challenges and impaled us into seeking more theoretical backup in order to provide students with more guidance to develop listening strategies and learn how to adjust their listening behavior so that they would be able to cope with an array of situations, types of input, listening purposes and successfully overcome if not all, a great deal of the challenges the aural input poses.

In order to put our project into action we have decided to use the action research model so that we would gather the data to nourish our decisions. Our first initiative was listening to our students' anxieties and expectations concerning language acquisition and obviously listening to some co-workers concerning how they were used to dealing with this skill within their classrooms and which focus it was being given. So, we applied questionnaires with both of them in order to get a starting point on their beliefs and realized that the skill they complained and aimed at mastering the most was **listening**.

The issues that immediately came to attention were: (i) What are the factors that contribute or influence our students' success? (ii) How to harvest more information on listening? What is its nature and what underlie the listening process? (iii) How to cope with our learners' anxieties, frustrations and the difficulties they face while listening? (iv) What are their limitations regarding listening strategies? (v) To what extent my beliefs have influenced my approach to listening tasks? (v) How to find ways to meet their needs by developing suitable strategies? So, our next step was start making plausible and effective decisions.

There are many factors and challenges that arise which define the way teachers approach their work and make decisions towards the appropriate strategies that will be employed in order to achieve their previously established goals. For as Richards (1999) states the contexts

in which teachers work have a huge influence on their teaching, since they play an array of different roles in different teaching settings. As Beare (1997) well states teaching listening may account for one of the most difficult challenges we face as language teachers; We must add to that assumption the fact that it is also the skill that provides solid foundations to develop the others. However, it is the one skill teachers still tend to take for granted.

Nunan (1999) points out that listening used to be treated as a secondary skill 'means to other ends' rather than an end in itself. Also, he states that 'ever so often listening comes into fashion'. He highlights two moments when listening acquired special attention: in the 1960's due to the emphasis on oral language skills and in the 1980's, when the ideas spread by Krashen on comprehensible input gave listening a whole new perspective. After that, listening has gained more attention and several studies on it brought substantial contributions to the way we view, address and teach listening skills in our language classrooms.

After researching, we came to the conclusion that the best thing to be done was to adapt some book tasks giving them a different approach and **build up**, along with the students, a **listening checklist**, so that they would be able to direct their attention, focus on a defined listening aspect and adequate the strategy acquired to accomplish successfully the tasks proposed and overcome their anxieties. At first, we applied this project with pre-intermediate students and then we made some adaptations and brought it into action with all the other levels, especially beginners, with remarkable results.

By creating a listening checklist we want to provide our students with opportunities to raise their perceptions towards what each task required, develop listening sub-skills and combine them meaningfully and successfully while listening in both contexts: classroom environment and realistic conversations where they would have to negotiate meaning and strengthen their communicative competence.

### *Out there in the woods having or not having a good approach to what you listen to, what difference would that make?*

Let us reflect that upon an extreme situation: What would you do and how would you feel if you were sent out to the woods with no supplies or whatsoever? To answer that query one would promptly reply: 'I would be terrified.' At first, that would be a natural reaction. Who would not feel that way under such circumstance? But time would come for you to calm down and start making decision in order to reach one target: keep alive. You would use all background knowledge and resources available in order to pursue that goal and survive until help gets to you.

Under that given circumstance what skills should one develop best in order to be out in the woods, where the unknown would be out there putting our life at risk at all times? At first, you would think that is a human being and fighting for survival would come out anyway; Most people would answer to that inquiry by saying: "survival trainings, certainly, to survive that situation"; Some would claim that having a good ear would make all the difference. Experts in survival training would assume that a combination of skills and knowledge on how to cope with the challenges posed would make the difference between life and death.

Using an analogy, transporting that situation into our language classrooms, most times, when we take listening for granted that is what we do to our students: we send them into the woods (listening tasks) with no training (lack of strategy) and assume they will do just fine as time goes by. However, what we may be doing here is sentencing our student to a slow and agonizing suffering that will be translated into lack of interest and motivation during listening tasks and that will get worse when they manage to reach MYP and ADV levels when they will be required to cope with tougher challenges and develop a whole new repertoire of strategies without having a solid foundation to do so.

Listening is the first and primary skill developed when we are learning our mother tongue. It is by listening that

we establish our relationship with others from our own species and others that are not, but with which we have contact with. At this point, listening strategies will be developed instinctively as we fight for survival and must interact with people in our environment and the challenges that environment poses. In the classroom, students should feel safe to embrace and pursue goals as well as overcome challenges they face while listening. Thus it is our role as teachers to provide them guidance to develop strategies and raise their awareness regarding how important of a tool **listening** is and the difference it makes whether one has or does not have very well developed listening strategies.

If we work listening properly toward the perspective it is a vital skill and develop listening strategies with our students, since the very beginning, they will feel more confident and manage to combine it with all the other skills and that will definitely make all the difference when the time comes that they will have to face other challenges their learning trajectory may bring. Conversely, taking listening for granted could be compared to throwing our students out there in the woods with no supplies or surviving listening skills.

### ***Listening: what is at stake?***

As Celce-Murcia (2001) states human communication serves to different purposes at the personal and social levels. Our daily life offers an array of contexts in which we have to not only express ideas, beliefs, and emotions, but also convey information. Needless to point out, that this range of information must be provided in a clear suitable manner, so that the understanding of the intended idea will be effective.

Due to their own nature, social interactions consist of spoken texts with a speaker and listener exchanging roles, taking turns, and reacting to what is being said what at times, inevitably, allows misunderstandings to take place. On the other hand, the fact that both sides involved in a given communicative context can interact provides the means to doubt clarification whenever communication of ideas fails.

From both linguistic and socio-cultural perspectives we, as listeners/communicators, engage in a constant negotiation of meaning regardless the communication circumstances. Our social interactions provide us with the means to negotiate meaning more interactively given its own dynamics, and it will, therefore, allow us, as Celce-Murcia (2001) stated, to disguise any sort of misunderstanding at once. And in order to do it successfully, students must develop solid listening foundations to help them cope with any sort of challenge communicative situations may bring both in the classroom and outside.

Anderson & Lynch (2000) assert that listening under many circumstances is a reciprocal skill and in a number of others it could be a non-reciprocal skill or even a one-way listening could be involved in the understanding process, for instance, when people have to listen to the radio, TV, watch movies or in our case when learners are required to accomplish listening tasks in the classroom, or answer their HOE tasks. The greatest challenge here lies in understanding the connections, establishing criteria, recognizing the sort of strategies underlie the listening process and most importantly, manage to provide students with opportunities to consciously combine as many strategies as they can in order to succeed.

Teachers should investigate the factors or even beliefs that may contribute to students' anxiety, and at times, resistance when they have to process listening aural input in order to accomplish those tasks. Learn their students' perceptions and difficulties regarding their own listening abilities and have them realize to what extent that may compromise or contribute to their communicative competence. Change their perception towards listening tasks, raise their awareness towards what they are expected to do and help them build up a checklist of procedures or things that they would have to pay attention to, so that they would be guided into mastering their listening skills.

As teachers, our main concern should lie on how to approach students' needs and help them overcome their individual difficulties by developing strategies and building up confidence while guiding them into pursuing

new and suitable strategies in order to increase their chances to succeed, enlarge their listening strategies repertoire, adequate them to the demands of the context focusing on improving both their understanding and communicative competence.

What we have to bear in our minds is that at first, we have to get to know the problem (learn students' needs and difficulties), face the challenges it poses, seek theoretical support, establish goals and make decisions aiming at meeting students' needs. Another important point is being aware that, we must deconstruct and reconstruct students' beliefs having them embrace a whole new attitude towards gradually developing their listening skills.

Something which is also at stake as Anderson & Lynch (2000) pointed out is that we have to seek balance between maximizing students' chance of performing suitably in the classroom and most importantly, make sure they would diminish their anxiety levels and be able to transfer the knowledge acquired whenever performing in a realistic context.

### ***What is successful listening comprehension?***

According to Beare (1997) teaching listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any ESL teacher and this is due to the fact that successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. As for Anderson & Lynch (2000) there are a number of different ways a listener can process or fail to process incoming speech. Ur (2001) mentions that there are a number of factors that can interfere in students listening comprehension, such as: new vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, no visual or environmental clues and mental block and we must add lack of focus and a definite listening routine could also contribute and lead learners to frustration while listening.

Understanding aural input and mastering rebuilding its original message is not an easy task itself. In order to acquire that, students try to dig into their mother tongue and seek for any reference that could allow them to grasp a better comprehension on what they are lis-

tening. Paradoxically, they search for an answer, but as it is done in a disorganized and guideless way they do not succeed. Our role as teachers lies in the fact that we must provide students with organized approach to enrich their listening abilities and become good listeners.

White (1998) defines good listeners as those ones who are able to use a combination of sub-skills simultaneously when processing spoken language. Anderson & Lynch (2000) assert that the listener has a fundamental part to play in the process by activating several sorts of knowledge and applying what he knows to what he hears in order to build up meaning. What is clearly implied by those authors is that good listeners are above all, the ones who have developed listening strategies and manage to use them accordingly.

By creating a **listening checklist** we have provided our CEP students with opportunities to raise their perceptions towards what the tasks required; benefit from keeping focused while listening; develop listening sub-skills and combine them meaningful and successfully in order to improve their listening comprehension outcomes.

#### ***Listening strategies:***

A great deal of language acquisition and effective communication skills depend on how developed ones listening skills are. Kanadpon (2002) asserts that although listening accounts for the first of all skills, it is neither the easiest nor the most meaningless one, since it consists of constant negotiation of meaning.

Oxford (1990) points out that 'learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning' process. But, most importantly we believe they are tools that allow them to overcome their fears, anxieties and help them rebuild their beliefs in order to succeed. By developing strategies students show much more confidence towards the type of tasks they have to tackle.

According to Celce- Murcia (2007) students have to cope with different processes when they engage in a listening task. They have to manage to combine and use cons-

ciously bottom-up processes (which consist of prior knowledge of the language system: phonology, grammar, vocabulary) and top-down processes (which involve the activation of schematic knowledge and contextual knowledge). Schematic knowledge immediately links us to prior knowledge: content schemata and formal schemata. Based on that we led students into creating their own listening checklist as follows:

- Background noise;
- Number of people;
- Key words
- Language used;
- Formal or informal;
- Tone of voice;
- Vocabulary;
- Topic of the conversation;
- Pronunciation;
- Gist of the conversation
- What is being required by the task (which strategies they should use or combine)
- Context;
- Visual aids/ body language...

### ***Beliefs, challenges and changes***

In a general sense, and as Richards & Lockhart (1999) assert our classrooms provide us with daily events that we could benefit from and develop a deeper understanding of teaching. They go on saying that those events can serve as the basis for critical reflection and lead us throughout our decision making aiming at developing

strategies for intervention and promoting change in order to meet our students' needs.

Our teaching routine drives us onto coping with diverse groups, on a regular basis, which implies dealing with different learning styles, assumptions and attitudes toward listening in L2. This scenery imposes challenges teachers must handle, such as students' learning pace, purposes, motivation, feelings towards the language, as well as their needs. The issues that emerge from that scenery is how to approach teaching, focusing on addressing, if not all, a greater range of possible variables that can interfere in their listening process? What role do their beliefs play? And how do those beliefs somehow determine their attitude while listening?

Our greatest challenge at this point, was to transform all that theory into something attractive and have students put them into action by practicing it whenever listening. To get started we decided to lead learners into changing their perception towards listening; Raise their awareness; Deconstruct their misconceptions and build up new ones; Improve their listening confidence and boost their communicative competence by developing suitable strategies and making arrangements to meet each listening task purpose.

#### ***Students' beliefs and anxieties: how to cope with them?***

Based on the belief that having a better understanding of the learners' perceptions, regarding listening, would enable us to succeed in our decision making throughout this project. We have engaged into listening to our students' considerations, feelings and fears toward listening and use the data collected in order to pursue and develop suitable strategies that would combine addressing students' needs, as well as meeting the purpose of the task.

Listening to our students we have detected that there are a lot of misconceptions concerning this skill: (i) First, they strongly believe that they must understand a 100% of the words in a listening passage in order to succeed. (ii) They believe they must be able to mentally translate

what is being said. (iii) Some believe that to successfully acquire listening skills and manage to be a good speaker they must go and live in a native English speaking country. (iv) They complain that it is impossible for them to keep up with natives' rate of speech and therefore, they panic and get lost. They simply freeze and compromise the continuity of the listening process.

Beare (1997) mentions that one of the largest inhibitors for some students is mental block. Keeping that piece of information in mind, our main concern was creating a suitable environment which could help learners improve and develop their listening strategies as well as lower their anxiety levels so that they could achieve more satisfactory results.

This point of the project is more of a reflective moment for both teacher and learners.

#### ***Teachers' beliefs: what role do they play in their practice?***

There are some things we must take into account concerning our teaching itself and what sort of foundation it finds in the studies and theoretical approaches Yázigí bases its philosophy. In addition, establishing a connection between our beliefs and our students' needs.

Nunan (1999) states that listening, as skill to be developed, has been overlooked by those who thought the learning process. This was due to a general belief shared long ago, by language teachers, that to claim knowledge of a second language one should only be able to speak and write. This way, listening and reading were considered secondary skills.

Some of the most common teachers' beliefs are that in order to diminish students' anxiety and lighten their burden they must anticipate the new vocabulary, expressions or pronunciation difficulties that may suppress their comprehension. Another one is that by simply reading or having students read the instructions and make sure students merely understand them/ come to know what they expected to listen will guarantee the deve-

lopment of suitable strategies. After that, they play the listening passage and check for the results. Then, play it again to see if they can get a little more from the listening excerpts. Finally, another common misconception among language teachers is that without any guided instruction or whatsoever the more teachers play the listening the more students will understand it.

The whole process of language acquisition and improvement of communicative competence through the development of listening strategies ends up reduced to the results achieved not to the processes/strategies used in order to acquire higher levels of language understanding and mastering listening proficiency. At this point, one issue remains: have teachers been teaching or just testing/checking listening results?

#### ***What challenges are faced and what changes should be promoted?***

Dealing with new things for both teachers and students may lead to an unsafe zone no one likes to be in. On one side students enter our language classrooms with the belief that they must understand everything they listen in order to succeed. On the other side, teachers often eager to facilitate and diminish students' anxieties and frustration to some extent tend to supply students fish, instead of teaching them how to fish.

According to Richards (1999) learners incorporate to learning their own beliefs, goals, attitudes and decisions, which in turn define how they approach their learning. Their belief systems cover an array of issues and can influence their motivation, expectations, perceptions and the kind of strategies they favor. However, to successfully achieve their goals learners must engage in and assume a more dynamic and interactive role towards the new language strategy acquisition. They should change their attitude regarding their learning process in order to succeed in acquiring, mastering and using suitable listening strategies.

Douglas Brown (1994) goes further and asserts that successful teachers need to have excellent interpersonal

communication skills, willingness to meet students needs, cultural adaptability, be patient and have passion for teaching. In short, they should have a different attitude towards the teaching/ learning and treat their classroom as a place that deserves to be constantly monitored and improved, so that they could facilitate or mediate their learners' improvement in a more effective way. And by adopting a more reflective posture they would promote their own professional growth as well as help their students develop learning strategies a great deal.

As Nunan (1999) states learners should not behave as a sponge passively absorbing models provided, they should be active participants reconstructing intended meaning by 'drawing on what they already know to make use of new knowledge.' As for teachers, Anderson & Lynch (2000) state that among other things they should focus on basically what the elements are that make up the knowledge or skill to be taught. We could add to that, reflect and map out their class listening tasks, list the sub-skills students would need in order to rebuild knowledge and master listening strategies.

### *Final considerations*

Richards (1999) asserts that well informed teachers as to the nature of their teaching are able to critically reflect upon their teaching experience with focus on both their professional growth and the aspects their teaching need to be improved. In addition, they should set realistic goals, approach lessons and teaching preparation step-by-step, listen to their learners and, most importantly, reflect upon their classes, material and learners' performance with focus on their challenges as a basis for making the appropriate decisions and as a source for change.

Bearing all that in mind, we came to the conclusion that first, when we engage our students into learning through a project, I mean when we manage to draw their attention/efforts into doing the right thing and have them buy our ideas, they become more focused, with a definite direction to follow, they feel safer, more confident and as a result they will be definitely more likely to fully en-

gage in what we are proposing. We must rephrase since the very beginning to build a trust bridge that will cause them to willingly deconstruct their previous beliefs and embrace new ones and little by little develop strategies.

Through this listening project students have managed to achieve remarkable results regarding improving their repertoire on strategies and improve their listening skills:

- First they were able to reflect upon their own listening practice/strategies in Portuguese;
- Based on their reflections they were able to select an array of elements that play an important role at accomplishing successfully listening comprehension tasks;
- Reflect upon the listening task and identify which strategy or strategies they would use or combine in order to accomplish a particular listening task;
- They created their own **listening checklist** so that they could make the best of their listening tasks and as a result, they naturally improved their communicative competence in terms of speaking;
- By using cooperative listening strategy during the most challenging tasks was a powerful tool at fighting their initial anxiety

At a certain point in the project they were much less stressed out, more likely to take risks and less concerned about the burden/ pressure they have carried or undergone in the very beginning of the project as they strongly believed they had to understand a 100% percent of what was being said in order to construct meaning and succeed.

Both teachers and students must bear in mind that the classroom constitutes a space to construct knowledge through interactions and the development of abilities and communicative skills in the light of a whole new perspective in terms of language learning, and listening strategies.

If we work listening properly toward the perspective it is a vital skill and develop listening strategies with our students, since the very beginning, they will feel more confident and manage to combine it with all the other skills and that will definitely make all the difference when the time comes that they will have to face other challenges their learning trajectory may bring.

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