# TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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*Abstract: How can we teach listening skills in such a way that students can both acquire them efficiently and retain them over time? One method is empathetic listening, meaning creating an emotional connection with the interlocutor. Another method has to do with bottom-up processing, meaning that the listening activities need to offer the conditions for the learners' understanding of divisions between word and clauses, recognizing key words, and so on. The importance of teaching listening nowadays has to do with the importance of language proficiency tests such as the Cambridge, TOEFL, IELTS, and so on, which allow non-native English speakers to emigrate to and work in English-speaking countries. Psychologists hold that good listening skills are essential to the communication process. Closely linked to the concept of empathy is the concept of active listening, rephrasing what has been said to show that you have understood. Standard multiple-choice questions from English language proficiency tests for listening comprehension reflect concepts from psychology such as empathy and active listening. The multiple choice answers suggest a rephrasing of the communication we hear on tape to show that the students have got the right meaning. What is more, theories from pragmatics can also improve the understanding of what happens in testing listening comprehension. The focus is usually on the implied meaning of various assertions.*

*Keywords: TOEFL, IELTS, Cambridge, empathy, active listening.*

## Introduction

We live in a culture of communication. A key element in communication is the ability to be not only an efficient and persuasive speaker but also a good listener. Being a good listener helps communication run smoothly. Frequent requests for repetition of what has been said are not only inefficient, but can even lead to conflict.

Even if the listener is passive in the act of communication, he does have a significant contribution to how well the message is given and received. If the listener is cooperative and attentive, the message comes quickly to its end. The communication process requires teamwork. Listener and speaker need to cooperate to get the message right and to pass it along correctly. The listener needs to focus on what the speaker says and ask good questions in order to clarify the message or to acquire more details where necessary. At the same time, the listener can ask a good question of the speaker and give him food for thought or necessary feedback. However, while these hold true for situations where speaker and listener interact; in listening tasks for students learning English as a second language, interaction with the speaker is not possible.

Being a listener engaged in a conversation is different from being a listener who understands what one, two or more speakers say. What skills can be useful to students of English as a second language? One disadvantage is that students listening to a taped conversation cannot ask the speakers to repeat information or ask for details about what they actually mean to say. Students need to interpret and decode the information as quickly as they can, focusing on the



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information and the interaction between speakers as a whole. In order to solve such listening tasks, students need to make use of empathetic and active listening. Empathetic listening requires emotional identification with the speaker, while active listening implies a very strong concentration on what the speaker says.

These situations are common in real life. For instance, everyone requires empathetic and active listening skills when watching a film or play. We use these skills automatically when something interests us and appeals to us. When we learn a foreign language we need motivation as well as practice to be good empathetic and active listeners and to succeed at a listening task with multiple choice answers.

## Communication according to Pragmatics

Pragmatics refers to the social use of language. Students of English as a second language are often tested on whether they understand the social use of language, such as proper use of greetings in various situations, using language to request information, permission, and so on. By knowing about the rules of communication, such as staying on topic, and taking turns in conversation, students can interpret questions correctly and choose the correct answer from the provided list. There are questions, such as "What does the speaker imply?" which students can solve by showing that they understand the role of social use of language and can correctly decode the speaker's attitude. If the conversation is on tape, the students will have, however, a limited view, if any, of nonverbal signs such as facial expressions and other body language. The process where a speaker implies and a listener infers is called, in pragmatics, implicature. Speakers often hint at a meaning, and the listener tries to understand their intentions. Some questions for listening comprehension focus on this process. Other questions focus on finding a certain piece of information, such as a place, a year, or the name of a person.

Istvan Kecskes claims that we should be suspicious of how realistic the view of Pragmatics on communication can be. According to him, Pragmatics shows an ideal and illusory model of communication, focusing on how communication should be and not on how it actually is:

"[…] current theories of pragmatics […] do not give an adequate account of what really happens in the communicative process. They consider communication an idealistic, cooperation-based, context-dependent process in which speakers are supposed to carefully construct their utterances for the hearer, taking into account all contextual factors and hearers do their best to figure out the intentions of the speakers. This approach relies mainly on the positive features of communication including cooperation, rapport and politeness while almost completely ignores the untidy, trial-and-error nature of communication and the importance of prior contexts captured in the individual use of linguistic units."

Pragmatics does, however, show the skills needed for communication. Students need to decode the implied meaning of what some speakers say, and they do so by judging the attitude they hear in their voices on tape, whether they are joking, being polite, formal or informal, whether they hesitate or whether what they say means they plan on doing a certain action.

By having knowledge of the social use of language, students will be able to better understand how conversations work and be more empathetic towards the speakers. After all, "The ability to empathize is an important part of social and emotional development, affecting an individual's behavior toward others and the quality of social relationships." (McDonald and Messinger 2)



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Empathy helps in the process of the speaker and listener's cooperation. It is a part of putting one in the other's shoes and realizing what they should say, how they should say it, and how to react to one another. "Communication is a social activity of a combined effort of a least two participants, who consciously and intentionally cooperate to construct together the meaning of their interaction." (Bara 2010: 1) Communication is making oneself understood and understanding what another person says, while each makes their best effort to understand and be understood.

The importance of the mental states of the participants in an act of communication is underlined by Cognitive Pragmatics:

"*Cognitive pragmatics* is the study of the mental states of people who are engaged in communication. Basing the analysis of communicative interactions on mental states means, first and foremost, examining *individual* motivations, beliefs, goals, desires, and intentions. The next step in the analysis is to examine how these states are expressed. The definition of communication as a process implies that communicating linguistically or extralinguistically will involve two different ways of processing data." (Bruno 2010: 1-2)

The students are thus motivated to be good listeners in order to finish the task successfully and to check their knowledge of the English language. Pragmatics at this point has a very strong connection with the field of psychology. The speaker's attitude counts for a lot in listening comprehension, as the students do not have access to other body language signs. The speaker's voice will offer insight into understanding the meaning that is hinted at in some situations. Here they make use of empathetic listening, trying to put themselves in the speaker's place in order to better picture the situation. Active listening, with its skills of strong concentration, is used to answer questions about details, such as someone's age or the name of a place or person. Active listening processes the information, while empathetic listening moves the listening skills to the pragmatic use of language.

## Being a Good Listener: Psychology

Therapists are asked to be good listeners. This means that they need to have empathetic listening skills, to know how to process and sort through the relevant information the patient gives them (active listening), and to have both life experience and cultural knowledge. Research has shown that about half of the adult communication process is listening. It is only natural that listening comprehension has come to be recognized as an important part in the study of a language. Language proficiency tests such as the TOEFL, IELTS and Cambridge tests include sections on listening comprehension. This recognition has only developed recently, with listening at first used primarily for repeating and pronunciation tasks in audiolingual methods and only later, in the 70s, used for a deeper understanding of communication:

"Research has demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of communication time listening (Gilman & Moody 1984), but the importance of listening in language learning has only been recognized relatively recently (Oxford 1993). Since the role of listening comprehension in language learning was taken for granted, it merited little research and pedagogical attention. Although listening played an important role in audio-lingual methods, students only listened to repeat and develop a better pronunciation (for speaking). Beginning in the early 70's, work by Asher, Postovsky, Winitz and, later, Krashen, brought attention to the role of listening as a tool for understanding and a key factor in facilitating language learning. Listening has emerged as an



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important component in the process of second language acquisition (Feyten, 1991)." (Vandergrift 2016)

Listening tasks require more than just seeking correct information and understanding pronunciation; they ask for psychological understanding of the interaction between two speakers. This knowledge is completed by notions of the pragmatic, social use of language. The situations presented on tape get as close as possible to communication situations in real life. The dialogues are not simple drills, but real-life situations, where speakers express their attitudes and feelings related to a certain topic and give hints to the listener about further action or advice. In real life situations, students may need to ask for directions or for information at a train station or airport, where their understanding and listening skills need to be very fast and efficient. Such listening tasks can be good training.

Vandergrift (2016) shows that there is always a psychological side to listening. What we already know functions as a background:

"Listening is an invisible mental process, making it difficult to describe. Listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intention, retain and interpret this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance (Wipf, 1984). […] Listening is a complex, active process of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know."

In using prior knowledge to listen, we draw not only from past social situations but also from our experience of various types of persons. The way we deal with them from past experience can help improve future communication. Past experience can influence our perception based on analogies with other situations. Past experience can help or hinder us when we think we understand the type of person a speaker is and relate to him as we think we should.

The fact that listening is a complex process, requiring lots of other skills that have to do more with psychology than with a simple gathering of information, is exemplified by Vandergrift, as he divides listening strategies into three types: metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective:

"Listeners use metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies to facilitate comprehension and to make their learning more effective. Metacognitive strategies are important because they oversee, regulate or direct the language learning process. Cognitive strategies manipulate the material to be learned or apply a specific technique to a listening task. Socio-affective strategies describe the techniques listeners use to collaborate with others, to verify understanding or to lower anxiety." (Vandergrift 2016)

The many operations listeners do when they listen show that listening is an active process. Vandergrift (2016) also states that there are two processes used in listening comprehension, 'top-down' when listeners use prior knowledge to understand the message's meaning, and 'bottom-up', when listeners make use of linguistic knowledge to understand the message's meaning. Vandergrift claims that listeners use both processes in combination during listening comprehension. We could argue that part of the prior knowledge is psychological in nature, since what we already know influences our perception. We search for familiar ground through comparisons based on prior knowledge. Sometimes we can be right and sometimes we can be wrong. This can influence the efficacy of the communication process.

## Conclusions



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Being a good listener is required of both teachers and students in order for their communication and relationship to be efficient, just as between a therapist and her patient. However, plenty of professions other than therapy require working with the public and communicating. Knowing how to be a good listener means knowing how to deal diplomatically with certain persons. Preparing students for listening tasks when studying English as a foreign language prepares them for situations they will have to deal with throughout their careers and lives. When they wish to establish contacts abroad for professional purposes, when they need to prepare presentations and will thus need to listen and react to the audience's response, whether to shorten or further explain some parts, they will use their empathetic and active listening skills. Business communication especially requires a speaker to be a good listener. In order to convince your audience with a presentation, you need to take their reactions into account on the spot. The two roles, speaker and listener, are not so far apart. In the end, the listener will speak and show what needs to be developed in the communication process and, sometimes, point out what was not said or what may need clarification. Communication is thus based on psychologically understanding the interlocutor, and person typology in general. Vocabulary and grammar knowledge can come in second, after knowledge of the social use of language and how people interact. When we read a literary text, much of our understanding of the deeper meaning of the text is derived from our knowledge of literary symbols. Figurative language can also be found in spoken communication and needs to be decoded, working the same way as literary allusions which need to be understood by an experienced, active and empathetic listener. It is true that some aspects related to prior knowledge and social use of language are specific to English culture, such as greeting forms and formulaic remarks necessary to British politeness, such as talking about the weather, and using conversation fillers such as "Do you know what I mean?", "I see," "Obviously," "By all means". However, this only makes it all the more important that students take the time to understand another culture than their own, and feel empathetic with their specific mode of conversation.

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