

## Teaching Selective Listening at University Level

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### Abstract

Despite of the fact that English is widely spread language all over the world and many people master the language successfully, we see the setbacks which students at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University suffer while doing the listening component at the exam. Many studies have been conducted by scholars to improve listening competences among the language learners. However, listening stays the most difficult skill for many learners. Among different types of listening I decided to focus on *Selective listening* (listening for specific information), a core skill that determines students' assessment and therefore their motivation. The study investigates the improvement of the selective listening skills among the students with focus of prosodic features of the language.

**Keywords:** listening skills, methodology, English language teaching, selective listening, global listening.

### Introduction

In recent years, much has been changed in the process of English language teaching. As J. Richards (2008:2) signifies teaching listening skills has attracted a greater level of interest in recent years than it did in the past. Now, university entrance exams, exit exams, and other examinations often include listening components, acknowledging that listening skills are a core component of second-language proficiency, and also reflecting the assumption that if listening is not tested, teachers will not teach it.

In the foreign language teaching, listening implies formation of those language skills which help learners understand and convey the already heard information. It is beyond question that listening is one of the most complicated skills among competences. Listening, as a teaching method differs from reading and writing in many ways. Students can skim the text quickly to get an idea what it is about, but listeners cannot skim. The language comes rushing in at them. Listening must be done in real time; there is no second chance, unless, of course, the listener specifically asks for repetition (S.Brown, 2006).

There are different types of listening. It can be classified according to a number of variables, including listening purpose, the role of the listener and the type of the text being listened to (D. Nunan, 1999:204). Nowadays, global listening (gist listening) is available for students and even for children, they listen to songs, watch movies, watch different kinds of TV programs, have pen friends, of course all the above mentioned provide a huge assistance concerning the general listening. However, at exams students show low results. They face difficulties in doing listening assignments like multiple choice, sentence completion, gap filling, T/F statements and others. Generally, at intermediate level students are able to communicate, but listening is still a problem for many of them. Some students think that they are not making the progress. Others think that listening tasks at the exam are more complicated than other components. At the end students loose motivation.

Thus the question arises, how teacher should behave? What teaching techniques should be used to facilitate the hard work, to provide interesting and profitable listening strategies not only for students with the linguistic intelligence but also for other intelligences? Students at this level need fresh challenges to help them realize how much they know and activate their passive knowledge.

The aim of the research is to find teaching approach that will help students improve their selective listening competences. First, I will discuss some existing listening teaching approaches with literature review and then I will describe the empirical research conducted by me and present some teaching strategies. Finally, I will offer some recommendations to English language teachers how make selective listening achievable for students.

In listening acquisition, hypothesis is accepted that two different methods are working in a cooperative process, one is connected to 'Bottom-up', and the other to 'Top-down' method C. Mursia (2001), Jack C. Richards (2008), Jo Mc Donough, Ghr. Show (2003), Michael Rost (2002), Steven Brown (2006), G Brown (1996) David J. Mendelsohn (1998).

Bottom – up processing refers to using the incoming input as the basis for understanding the message. Comprehension begins with the received data that is analyzed as successive levels of organization – sounds, words, clauses, sentences, texts – until meaning is derived. Comprehension is viewed as process of decoding. Top-down process, on the other hand, refers to the use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message. Whereas bottom-up processing goes from language to meaning, top-down processing goes from meaning to language (Jack C. Richards ,2008).

A typical listening component at the lesson that includes three – part sequence, consists of pre-listening, while-listening, post-listening and link activities involving activating prior knowledge, comprehension and

giving opinions about the topic is no longer a novelty.

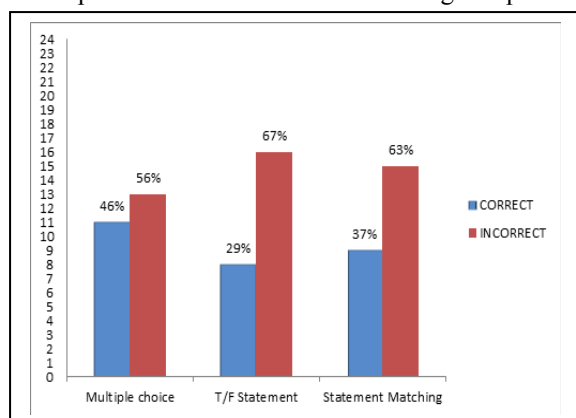
### Findings and Discussion.

To answer the above mentioned questions, I decided to conduct an empirical research with the second year students of the Humanities faculty at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (2015 academy year). There are 24 students in the group (no foreign students). Students are of intermediate level and deal with the course book *English File*. As for the research method I used *Action research* which enables practical teachers to focus on particular features of language classrooms (Murcia 2001:490), and quantitative for comparative sequence.

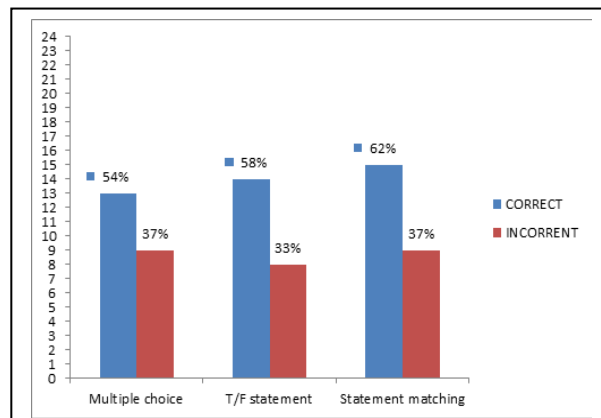
Working with the group during one semester I planned listening strategies to address the problem and carried out. Nevertheless, I focused on Bottom – up process rather than Top – down. Why Bottom-up process? For selective listening skills, students should be confident in ‘bottom-up’ process which means that the listener should be able to comprehend some hint words and phrases while listening. Scientists M. Hewings (2004), J. McDonough and Cr. Show(2003), C. Mursia(2001), D.Nunan (1999), G..Brown (1996) explain in their books that phonetic features such as: stress, intonation, rhythm, connected speech and others help listeners identify the meaning of a speaker and obtain the specific information. And as M. Rost (2002:138) describes, the ability to listen intensively (listening for precise sound, words, phrases, grammatical and pragmatic units) is an essential component of listening proficiency.

I focused on group and did systematic observation of the outcomes of given activities, although, this study takes a principally qualitative approach and is exploratory, some quantitative data is used to support the argument. So, for more validity and self-confidence in my research I measured students’ Mid- course and Final- test results (listening component only). Variables were as following: a. Multiple choice – students listen to a radio interview and are to answer multiple choice questions. b. students listen to the text and circle the right answer T (true) or F (false). c. Multiple matching – students listen to short monologues and match the provided statements with the monologues. Each exercise consists of 5 tasks and students are assessed with 2 scores for each correct answer.

Comparable with the Mid Course Test results (11 students from 24 gave the correct answer in the first task; 8 students from 24 could circle the right answer in the second and as for the third listening task 9 students managed to match the statements correctly). I saw a good progress, results of the students work has been improved in 58%. Exactly 13 students fixed the right answers about the first task, in the second exercise 14 and in the final exercise 15 students gave the correct answers. I would say that using such type of teaching approach has improved students’ selective listening competences.



Mid – Course Test



Final - Course Test

The first listening strategy which I would like to present focuses on differentiation of lexical and functional words in the text. The aim of the activity is to make students concentrate on lexical words while listening. (listening material- *English File* Intermediate . Unit 1. Ex.5 pp 7)

- I hold a small discussion with students on the topic ‘food and the restaurant,’ students talk about how often they visit the restaurant, what sort of restaurants and pubs we have in our region, what kind of food they offer us, they talk about the downsides of the service (to generate some ideas concerning the topic. Top-down process).
- While discussing I pre-teach (write up on the board) some words and phrases that students might not know.
- I distribute the printed tape script to students and in pairs they read and mark the words which they think might be under stress (lexical words) and words which might be reduced (functional words).
- They listen to the tape and compare their variants. Again I hold a mini discussion concerning lexical and functional words, write up some of them on the board and emphasize so-called concept words, why it is important to pay attention to lexical words while listening.

- At this point students listen to the tape for the second time but with pauses, I pause after each question and ask students to highlight the lexical words, why they are important for the meaning of the sentence, what function do they carry, why are they pronounced a bit stronger and more significantly than grammar or functional words. Students conclude why it is significant to be attentive towards the lexical words.
- Students listen to the tape once more and take time to answer the questions, after doing individually they compare with their partner and then within the whole class interaction I check the answers.

The second strategy which I would like to present focuses on comprehension of the important details in the stream of speech. The aim of the activity is make students stay focus while listening to a long text, concentrate and recognize the useful details for the test. Listening material – (*English File Intermediate*. Unit 2. Ex.2. pp 24) students listen to a news bulletin which features to a whole range of numbers.

- In the beginning, I hold mini discussion with students concerning TV programs and especially news blogs. What information do we hear while listening the news, I brainstorm ideas, activate their prior knowledge concerning the topic and guide them to the listening material.
- Students listen to the tape for the first time and get general understanding of the bulletin, they simply count the number of the news items and distinguish what the news items is about.
- I do eliciting connected to the news items and write on the board. Then ask students to listen again, at this point they focus on numbers.
- Students in pairs match the heard numbers with provided news items.
- Now, concentrated on the questions, students take time to read them, highlight the key words in questions to help them stay focus on the topic while listening. Then they listen again and this time in sections (item by item) and get students to answer the two questions on each item.
- For checking I distribute the printed tape script, in pairs students read and compare their answers. Afterwards I check their answers and see whether their comparison about numbers and news items were correct or not.
- In addition, students listen to the tape with the tape script to see what they understood / did not understand, what was difficult. I explain or translate some new words or phrases.

The following listening strategy which I am going to present in the article is connected to intonation. The aim of the activity is to help students differentiate different types of intonation in the stream of speech, make them focus on pitch of the voice changing continuously. (Listening material - *English File Intermediate*. Unit 3, ex 5 pp36)

- Since the top-down process is essential while doing any kind of listening activity, I hold a mini discussion with students on the given topic ‘British manners / good or bad manners of English people.’ So, to generate ideas about the topic students talk about the characteristic mode of acting of British people, what they know or what are their imaginations concerning habitual style of British people.
- Students listen for the first time for the gist or global listening, I do comprehension check.
- I distribute printed tape script to students and ask them while listening the tape for the second time, mark the sentences with the punctuation marks such as: declarative sentence (.); interrogative sentence (?); surprise (??); excitement (!); anger (!!). I write the punctuation marks on the board for more clearance.
- First students check with their partner then with the whole class interaction I do checking.
- For the following step I ask students to intone the sentences with the intonation marks.

In the distributed tape scripts students with their partners intone the sentences and then for the last time listen to the tape and compare their variants.

- I do checking, then I hold mini discussion connected to intonation. How important is it to pay attention to the intonation while listening to indicate the speaker’s attitude, feelings and emotions (anger or excitement, surprise, agreement, completeness of an idea or incompleteness). Intonation can have different communicative functions and therefore help students to determine the right answer in the test or convey the detailed information.
- In the end students complete the listening task, they concentrate on the questions and give answers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion I would say that using the teaching approach top-down and bottom – up process while doing listening component made students more self-confident and attentive towards listening tasks. However, I would specify that every time while managing with listening task I paid much more attention to the bottom-up process or so called phonetic features that help students perceive the heard information. Accordingly, students became aware of listening correctly, of course I would not say that students improved their listening competences in 100% in one semester but it did a great favor. Practice is essential for text comprehension, however, quality in the listening process becomes even more significant since it helps the listener to stay focus on specific details. Consequently, while listening paying much more attention to phonetic features such as: context words, sentence stress, pausing, intonation and rhythm facilitates the hard work, helps students obtain the specific detail and

determine the right answer in the listening tasks. Paying attention to phonetic features in order to gain the meaning of a speaker is as important as lexis, idioms and cohesive devices. Not only teacher teaches how to listen correctly using the right strategies but also students are more motivated as challenging listening texts become achievable. Once correct teaching approach has been used by the teacher, students will grab opportunity to realize their potential, the more practice they do the better results they show.

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