ENHANCING LISTENING COMPREHENSION AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF UPPER-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL OF ENGLISH

Y. Petrova

MGIMO-University (Moscow State Institute of International Relations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RUSSIAN FEDERATION)

Abstract

Nowadays students have permanent access to media technologies and are exposed to a lot of authentic English content: TV programs, news videos and series. Technological advances give them an opportunity to watch videos and listen to podcasts on a daily basis. However, students of even a relatively high level of English experience difficulties in listening comprehension.

The objective of the research is to analyze various techniques which are used to develop listening comprehension skills among undergraduate students of upper-intermediate level. An in-depth analysis of the students’ test results enabled the evaluation of the employed techniques.

The method of the research combined both quasi-experimental and reflective approaches. A total of 20 students of upper-intermediate level participated in the study. The paper provides a detailed description of the activities aimed at developing listening comprehension among upper-intermediate learners. The study also highlights the importance of the use of authentic listening material in an English course.

The research findings show that the suggested ways of improving the vocabulary and listening skills have a highly positive effect on the progress students have made during the course. The paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of various listening activities, as well as opportunities for improvement by means of technologies available to teachers in a classroom.

Keywords: listening comprehension, English teaching, upper-intermediate, listening skills.

1 INTRODUCTION

Globalization has had a tremendous effect on the educational process. Travel has become more available, communication technologies have enabled people to get connected with people from all over the world and get access to the media from multiple sources from different parts of the world, many students have an opportunity to travel extensively, go to summer language schools abroad, make international friends and communicate in English on a regular basis.

With the development of internet media technologies, people can actually live in a world of their own, watching foreign TV channels through satellite TV. It all boosts students’ motivation to study foreign languages in general, as they see and experience culture first hand in the countries where the target language is spoken. The exposure to audio material has increased. Now students listen to podcasts, watch undubbed films, the news online and on satellite TV channels. As a result of new opportunities, the students’ degree of competence is rising. We also note a higher level of vocabulary skills. In this study we set out to analyze techniques and tools to enhance upper intermediate students’ listening skills, ways to boost students’ motivation in listening activities and ways to train students’ immediate memory while listening in class.

Many professionals argue that under the conditions of ubiquity of communication technologies, less emphasis should be put on improving listening comprehension skills in class. However, we believe the importance of understanding aural discourses has increased even more, given the amount of information people are exposed to by means of various communication technologies. As listening occupies 45 percent of all the time people spend communicating according to researchers [1]. So the role of listening comprehension skills cannot be underestimated.

In this paper we set out to analyze techniques aimed at enhancing listening skills. It is essential that the material is selected according to the students’ outlook. On the other hand, it is important to broaden students’ outlook by means of material we offer in class.
2 METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objective we used quasi-experimental and reflective methods in the research. A total of 20 undergraduate students from 2 groups participated in the study. Various tools to develop listening skills were applied in target group 1 (10 students). According to the curriculum students of this group have an eighty-minute listening class once a week. The main listening material is the students' book "Listen and Discuss" by M.Konkol and E. Zorina. The material in the textbook is designed for enhancing informational listening and critical listening. In group 2 students studied the syllabus textbook New Language Leader Upper-Intermediate level (Pearson) with no focus on listening skills. Nevertheless, the textbook is accompanied by audio materials available online.

In addition to the exercises in the listening material from the book "Listen and discuss" mentioned above students of target group 1 were given the task to watch documentaries, news reports, podcasts, and make presentations in class at home. The performance of both groups was studied and assessed. The students under consideration took standard placement and final tests so that their performance was evaluated accurately and objectively. Target group 1 (10 students) and group 2 (10 students) studied New Language leader textbook according to the regular curriculum of the course of the English language. At the beginning of the course the students of target group 1 and group 2 were supposed to take the placement to evaluate the level of English competence and to ensure the results of the placement test reveal that students of both groups are eligible to enter the research.

The units in the students' book "Listen and Discuss" by M. Konkol and E. Zorina encompass several tasks featuring video and audio material such as news excerpts, interviews, entertaining videos, and informative performances. They cover such topics as education, travel, employment, international relations, medicine, technology, business, arts and entertainment and law and order. These materials proved to be valuable, give an insight into the real authentic language and boost students' motivation to study. Video and audio materials are borrowed from original sources from countries of the target language, and, thus, can be considered authentic. They also demonstrate different accents and variants of the English language. It is essential to mention that all videos and audio pieces are very informative and are selected with a view to arouse students' curiosity and interest. Enlightening material encourages students to discuss and share their viewpoints. Some controversial topical issues caused heated debate and discussion. Not only does such material boosts students' involvement, but also broadens their outlook and gives an insight into different spheres of life students have very little knowledge of. This insight they get from the listening pieces will come in handy in other listening pieces in class or in real life situations.

Below we set out to discuss typical tasks used to enhance students listening comprehension skills.

The first task is intended to develop students' prediction skills. People are more likely to perceive the information more easily if they can predict what they are going to hear. The authors suggest answering general questions about the place or the phenomenon students are going to hear in the listening. This task is followed by a glossary of challenging words accompanied by the definitions. Then students are supposed to fill in the gaps in a summary of the video with the vocabulary from the glossary. This task is designed for building up the vocabulary before watching the video. Practicing the vocabulary, especially if there is potentially challenging vocabulary, helps to memorize them and recall the meaning quickly while watching.

Before students watch the video for the first time they are encouraged to read general questions they will have to answer after they watch the video. Another task of the first time listening is to provide the gist of the video. Typical videos are from 3 to 5 minutes long. Then students watch the video for the second time for detailed information. Questions after listen for detail typically involve taking notes of the information about people's age, certain numbers, reasons, detailed information about the things featured in the video. As a follow-up activity, students are asked questions about their opinion on the issues, or they are encouraged to interpret the meaning of certain statements put forward by the speaker. Such activities encourage a discussion, students exchange opinions and interacting with each other on the topic of the video they also learn to use idiomatic expressions and phrases the speaker uses in his speech. This spontaneous interaction is similar to the process of language acquisition, an unconscious process which occurs in informal situations, however formally it belongs to language learning, as it still takes place in school and guided by the teacher.

The second listening task involves commenting on some statements connected to the topic of the audio material introduced by statements listening to the recording and put the issues in the order they are presented by the speaker. In other chapters students are supposed to match the statements on the list with the speakers.
The third task is videos borrowed from TED-Ed educational platform. Videos are normally not longer than 10 minutes. At the beginning a summary of the speaker's background gives students an insight into the topic. To develop prediction skills students are asked to guess what the talk is going to be about. After that students watch the video and either do a multiple choice task focused on the content of the video or put things mentioned in the video in order or tick statements as true or false or answer questions.

The fourth task involves commenting on a picture, for example, one which depicts a young man climbing a cliff. Students look at the picture and name and describe the activity, using suggested adjectives from the box. If their meaning is unclear, the teacher explains it to students. The teacher also asks some follow-up questions such as what struck students most about the activity or if they would like to do a similar activity. This task serves as an introduction to the listening. Then students listen to a first part of a recording about the interview with a young athlete about his climbing career. Students mark statements as true or false. Then they listen to the second part of the interview and complete the notes with one word in each space in suggested sentences. After that students look at the phrases the interviewee used in his answers and interpret what he meant by saying these phrases. Phrases involve some colloquial expressions or challenging vocabulary which meaning students might not know.

The last assignment involves a video which is divided into small two or three minutes’ pieces. Students first Read the introduction about the speaker and the talk. Then they work in pairs and discuss the questions related to the talk. Then they read the sentences from the video and try to guess the meaning of the words in bold, after that they match them with their definitions. Then they watch the first part of the video and choose the correct option to complete the statements from the video. They watch the second part and mark sentences as try or false, and the third part involves completing a summary with one word in each space.

Home assignments involve listening tasks. Students listen to a recording or watch a video and either complete summaries or answer questions or write the script of what they hear. Some assignments involve ticking true sentences and matching statements with speakers.

Video and audio materials are borrowed regardless of the speakers' origin and background. Many speakers are not English native speakers, others come from different parts of English-speaking countries. Thus, they have foreign and local accents. These accents often hamper clarity of speech, and thus, students cannot understand the words and phrases they already know. However, the only way to train students' ear to comprehend different speech is to listen to more accents on a regular basis.

It is important to keep students motivated by offering topics students might get interested in. Tasks are numerous, and there is not sufficient in-class time for all the tasks in the textbook. So the teacher can ask students to choose the videos which they might be keen to watch instead of watching all videos in order.

It is essential to raise awareness among students about the importance of taking notes or useful expressions and learning them from the speaker. It is not obvious to many students that their memory is not well-trained from the very beginning to memorize dates, numbers and other detailed information alongside exact phrases used. It is indispensable to instil such a discipline and help students observe these listening principles.

One of the most effective techniques is to train short-term memory. This is a very simple, yet efficient, way to teach students to discern every individual word and master the skill of understanding the entire discourse. The teacher plays a short piece ranging from two to five seconds. Then stops the recording and have students repeat every single word after the speaker. At the outset students short term memory is really weak, so they cannot commit to memory and repeat even short phrases of 3 or 4 words. However, if they practice more and more, they inevitably train the memory and acquire the skill of discerning words the speaker says. It is worth noting that this technique helps to accelerate the processing of the information they receive from the speaker. It also contributes to expanding students' vocabulary, as students unconsciously memorize the expressions used in the recording when they reproduce them after listening. As part of students home assignment students are given the task to write the script of the recording. It involves doing the same action without the teacher's assistance at home. Students put effort into making out the separate words. If some vocabulary items remain indistinct, students are supposed to spell them as they can and look them up in an online dictionary. It is important that the script should be looked through and discussed in class, as students will still find
some expressions unclear and the teacher's responsibility is to spell out and explain in detail all obscure things.

When students write the script as part of their home assignment, it is essential that they cannot find the neither subtitles nor the script itself in other sources. If videos are available on youtube.com, students can resort to automatically generated subtitles, which service has become quite accurate recently. It is critical to ensure individual work without aids.

3 RESULTS
The techniques of enhancing listening comprehension skills were analyzed, necessary abilities which contribute to a better comprehension were identified and their effectiveness was demonstrated when the final test results were obtained and analyzed.

Doing the tasks aimed at developing listening comprehension students managed to:

1. Dramatically expand the vocabulary of the target language. They improved the knowledge of idiomatic expressions on various topics.
2. Broaden their outlook on different issues.
3. Raise awareness about topical issues. Listening activities highlighted the importance of staying informed about different issues, as it facilitates listening comprehension.
4. Develop a detailed listening comprehension by means of repeating the exact wording from the speakers' talks.
5. Raise awareness about various local accents and improve comprehension of foreign accents which English non-native speakers have.
6. Participate actively in discussions and learn to use new idiomatic expressions in a context of their own, thus, express their viewpoint more accurately.
7. Develop reasoning, critical thinking and analytical skills, as controversial issues in the listening material often lead to opposing opinions.
8. Train their short-term memory and use new skills to their advantage.
9. Learn to process the information more quickly.

All of the techniques mentioned above resulted in a significant improvement of students' performance at the final test, which indicates better developed listening comprehension skills.

We can identify the advantages of using the techniques mentioned above:

1. These techniques are inherently interactive and can prevent the monotony of the class if used in turn.
2. Authenticity of the material enables students to expand the vocabulary in real context, intended for a native speaking audience.
3. The tasks are relatively easy to apply in class and can be given as a home assignment, and can be done by students individually.
4. They contribute to students' personal growth and broaden students' outlook. They teach them to respect other opinions and develop a nonjudgmental attitude to concepts.
5. All the above mentioned significantly improves listening comprehension skills, and reduces the time students need to process the information.

3.1 Test results
Before the course students took a placement test to prove their eligibility for the research. And at the end of the course students took a final test, which allowed us to assess the progress they have made.

3.1.1 Placement test results
3 students (30%), 4 students (40%) received excellent grades according to European Credit Transfer and Accumulation system (ECTS) in target group 1 and group 2 respectively. 4 students (40%), and 5 students (50%) got very good and good grades in target group 1 and group 2 respectively. And 2 students (20%), 1 student (10%) received satisfactory grades in target group 1 and group 2.
respectively. Taking into consideration the results of the test we can conclude that the target group is slightly weaker in terms of listening comprehension skills. Nevertheless, we decided that both groups demonstrated sufficient knowledge and proved to be eligible to participate in the study, as the placement test results were quite comparable.

Table 1. Placement test results.

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<th>&gt;90</th>
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<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>Group 2</td>
<td>40%</td>
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3.1.2 Final test results

At the end of the semester the students of the two groups took an achievement listening test to measure the progress students have made in both groups. The test tasks involved listening of 5 recorded pieces and complete a post listening multiple choice test, answer-questions test, gap-fill, true-false tests, a test in which students are supposed to match speakers with the statements they make.

6 students (60%), 3 students (30%) received excellent grades in target group 1 and group 2 respectively. 4 students (40%), and 6 students (60%) got very good and good grades in target group 1 and group 2 respectively. And 1 student (10%) received a satisfactory grade in group 2, while no students received satisfactory grades in target group 1. We observe a twofold improvement of test results in target group.

Table 2. Final test results.

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<th>&gt;90</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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3.1.3 Difficulties and challenges

One of the most common issues is that they miss the most important part because they are not familiar with a vocabulary item or cannot make out a familiar item because of an accent of the speaker, when students try to listen closely. When those unfamiliar items pile up, they all turn into a snowball and students lose the whole train of thought and, as a result, the message itself.

Students have a short attention span. They often get distracted and turn to their cell phones and, consequently, miss many parts which are important for understanding. Distraction makes them think about unrelated things instead of predicting what is going to be said next.

Many, especially those who struggle to make out audio, have a negative outlook on listening activities. They get frustrated when they do not excel at listening comprehension tasks and often give up even trying to listen thoroughly.

Another challenge students face is a plethora of complex vocabulary items. The introduction of these vocabulary items before presenting the listening material itself does not help, as many students simply cannot memorize a lot of new vocabulary only after reading their meaning.

3.1.4 Opportunities for improvement

It is worth selecting diverse material on different subjects even within the same topic from different parts of the world even within one topic. It broadens students horizon, as we have to note that in many instances people fail comprehension tests, as they cannot understand ideas they have no background knowledge whatsoever. So it is essential to work on students’ general culture and outlook in the framework of developing vocabulary and listening skills.
The encouragement tricks designed to praise the students proved useful, as students are more motivated to work further if they can see positive results from their effort. After realizing they have succeeded in doing the task right, students do their best next time.

The vocabulary difficulties can be overcome if a couple of exercises are offered after pre-teaching the vocabulary items. Students can be given a task to think of sentences of their own to demonstrate they have understood the meaning correctly and memorized the vocabulary item at least to a certain extent. However, topics should also be chosen carefully to avoid unnecessarily complicated issues. Nevertheless, topics should pose a certain challenge to students and proved new information, as this way interest, motivation and higher students’ involvement are guaranteed.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The research results reveal that techniques of enhancing listening comprehension skills for students of upper intermediate level of English have proved efficient. They boost students’ motivation, arouse interest and curiosity and broaden their outlook, which contributes to students’ personal growth. They prevent the class from getting monotonous, the tasks increase the students’ exposure to authentic academic and informal English content. In this globalized world the requirements employers now set for graduates have increased dramatically. And the task teachers have to undertake nowadays is to prepare students for the new standards.

REFERENCES


