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А.Л. Буран

*Национальный исследовательский
Томский политехнический университет*

How to Develop Listening Skills for Technical Students

This paper deals with the problem how to develop listening skills for technical students through listening. We refer to top-down and bottom-up competences, different sub-skills involved in the process of listening. We focus on the exercises associated with teaching listening in EFL classroom that help undergraduates develop their listening skills in an effective way.

Key words: listening skills; bottom-up competence; top-down competence; sub-skills; background knowledge; discourse organization; sociolinguistic knowledge.

Listening is one of the most difficult types of activities for students who learn English as a second language. The aim of teaching listening is to develop top-down and bottom-up competences. Bottom-up competence implies teaching vocabulary, tending to focus on pronunciation of new vocabulary. We also need to draw students' attention to intonation, stress, pauses, reductions. Top-down competences include developing background and discourse knowledge,

strategies and sociolinguistic competence. According to Goodith White sub-skills involved in listening are the following:

Perception skills which provide recognizing sounds; identifying reductions (e.g. elision and assimilation); identifying stressed syllables; identifying stressed words in utterances; understanding intonation.

Language skills such as: identifying separate words and understanding their meanings as well as identifying discourse markers that help learners in the process of listening.

Using knowledge of the world implies connecting groups of words to non-linguistic features such as expressions, gestures in order to get clues to meaning; being aware of a topic of the conversation to guess what the speaker is saying about.

Skills necessary to deal with information involve understanding the gist, the main facts and the details.

Interacting with a speaker. This skill requires recognizing the speaker's intention, predicting what the speaker will say next [2, p. 8].

Students need to use different sub-skills while listening, so they should know how to cope with difficult texts effectively. Learners must deal with a variety of strategies, such as predicting content, guessing, recognizing redundancies.

The following exercises can help develop bottom-up competence: distinguishing sounds, stress; pauses, reductions, grammatical forms.

Here are some examples of exercises to make students more aware of pauses and stressed words. It's necessary for a teacher to choose a short excerpt of a recording from a course book and make a transcript of the listening without punctuation. Then a student is asked to insert punctuation, listen and check. One more task here is to mark stressed words in the sentence and where each word is stressed.

To recognize weak forms in connected speech the following exercise can be done: students are asked to listen to a short phrase from the audio and count the number of words they hear after the word *but*, e.g. «*Yeah with my sister. She loves it but...*». Then the teacher plays the audio and checks in class the correct answer: «*I'm not as keen as she is*». The right answers are seven or eight words because of the contractions. One more task here is to type this phrase on the board: «*I'm not as keen as she is*» and discuss which words are stressed. They are: *not, keen, she*. These words are stressed because they carry the meaning. Micro listening can help the learners raise their awareness of strong and weak sounds, stressed and unstressed words; develop noticing skills, become better listeners.

Top-down competence is based on background knowledge, discourse organization, sociolinguistic knowledge and coping strategies that are very important for a listener. The learner uses the knowledge of the world to understand the meaning of the text. Top-down listening skills include: listening for the main ideas, for specific information, prediction and inferencing.

Discourse organization implies knowing what type of text the listeners are going to hear (a lecture, a meeting, an interview and etc.); main and subsidiary points; organizing devices.

According to Larry Vandergrift & C. M. Goh Christine «discourse knowledge is very important in interactive listening. Listeners use discourse knowledge to facilitate the processing of what they hear and how they may be asked to respond» [1, p. 26].

Using their background knowledge, students can predict the correct answers easily. Before listening and filling the missing words in the text the teacher asks the learners to guess the answers. While listening for the first time students complete the missing information, after listening for the second time the learners check their answers and the teacher should give the learners time after the recording has finished before checking the answers in the class. Lack of time doesn't let the teacher give a lot of time, but students need this time and ask the teacher not to interrupt them in order to concentrate, to reflect and to choose the correct answers.

Strategic knowledge can help students cope with what they haven't understood. It is necessary to explain to students that they should go on to the next part if they did not understand some words.

To sum up, a person who is good at listening should be motivated and interested in what the speaker is talking about. Before listening he should plan in his head what and how he is going to listen. While listening a successful learner uses the words he knows to understand the words and the topic he does not know. He also does not translate word by word, uses the general idea of the topic to predict the meaning of new words.

Teachers should pay more attention to pre-listening tasks as more context leads to more successful listening.

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