**Flexible Note Taking While Listening, An Effective Tool to Develop Efficient Listening Skills Among ESL/EFL Adult Learners**

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**ABSTRACT**

Effective listening skills involve attentive listening to both aural and visual stimuli, followed by comprehension, restoration of the received messages and intentions, and then recognition of the effective listening through an appropriate response. But a quick comprehension and prolonged restoration of any information and intention for future use especially while listening to any foreign languages is not always easy for ESL or EFL adult learners. However, a two-phase empirical study conducted with 194 adult learners divided in 2 groups (controlled and experimental group) successfully proved that an effective comprehension of the received message and intention, and most importantly its retention for a longer time can be possible if any adult ESL/ EFL learner can take flexible notes while listening, especially of the content words spoken and the emotional markers in the listening content, in target language. The paper focuses on the importance of Listening as language skill and how flexible note taking while listening, especially of the content words and emotional markers, can help in developing effective listening skills for adult ESL/ EFL learners.

Key words: Listening as a language skill, adult ESL / EFL learners, and flexible note taking.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

"**Listening**" as a language skill is never a passive process like hearing. It involves proper attention and motivation, reception of information as well as intention of the speaker through eyes and ears, identification of language (both the segmental and supra – segmental elements) and appropriate understanding of the speaker’s data and purposes, retention of that message and intention, and finally making an appropriate response.

H. P. Grice in one of his articles “Utterer’s Meaning and Intentions” suggested that “the meaning of an utterer’s remark is reducible or equitable to the intention of the utterer in making that remark” (Grice, 1969). The basic role of a listener then is to establish what the intension of the speaker is. The success or failure of communication thus mainly depends on this determining capability of the listener. A good listener therefore is one who attends the speaker’s vulnerability or inability to express certain things with appropriate language tools (both segmental and supra – segmental), ‘determine’ his or her ‘intention’ appropriately, and ‘holds’ the information for future references.

To Frederick S Berg listening involves ‘detection, discrimination, recognition and comprehension of speech through audition, vision, or both in combination.’ (Berg, 1987) It is a combination of what we hear, understand and remember. Listening thus is a natural blend of nonverbal and verbal purposive attention. It is an effortful task and should be actively practiced.

There is nothing denying the fact that utterances can be the products of multiple intentions (Grice, 1969). And perhaps this multidimensional quality of a speech makes the process of communication highly complex. More intricate and challenging it becomes for an adult ESL/EFL learner, when he or she is asked to listen and comprehend a content in target language for the first time at his graduation or tertiary level of education.

In countries like India, especially in a state like West Bengal, learners are not encouraged to study in English medium schools. They often go to schools where the medium of instruction is primarily in vernacular – Bengali or Hindi. At the primary level only, kids get dictation practices or learn rhymes and songs listening to their teachers. But such practices are not frequent at their secondary or higher secondary levels. They listen to English instructions only in English literature classes alone. No practice of listening or speaking in English is done in and outside the classroom. Thus, most learners learn English as a foreign language and not as second language.

Since there is no prescribed syllabus on language learning at the secondary and higher secondary level of education, learners at those stages get no formal and systematic practices to improve on their listening skills at that vital stage of their life. Thus, most of them find it difficult to listen, comprehend, restore, and respond to English language activities at the language classroom at their graduation or tertiary level. They show signs of lack of confidence and capability to listen and understand the information as well as the intention of the speaker. They hesitate, faulter and often remain demotivated whenever asked to accomplish a listening task.

But it has been observed that with flexible note taking while listening to target language (English) learners learning English as second language or foreign languages could improve their listening skill quite effectively. With flexible note taking while listening, these ESL/ EFL adult learners could have handy written contents of what they have listened to moments ago, for their better understanding of the content and restoration of the same.

As already been stated above, since these ESL/ EFL adult learners till their graduation level had no such formal and systematic practices of listening to any foreign content or L2 (English), it is observed that that those among the experimental group who were asked to take flexible notes while listening especially about content words and emotional signals like tone and pitch of voice, could answer more question than those who just listened and relied on their memory alone.

1. **LITERARY REVIEW**

Tahir Gur et al. (2013) in their paper “The Impact of Note-Taking While Listening on Listening Comprehension in A Higher Education Context” studied how listening comprehension can be affected by note-taking while listening to different lecture types (informative, narrative and philosophical). They carried out their studies at Department of Turkish Language Teaching at the Faculty of Education, Cumhuriyet University, and adopted an experimental design with a pre-test and post-test and found a higher levels of comprehension for all three lecture types in favour of the participants who took notes while listening to the lectures. They experimented with 122, 3rd and 4th year students, categorized them into experimental group, and the control group; gave four-hour practical training on note-taking techniques to the experimental group alone, and asked both groups to listen and answer 25 gap filling listening comprehension questions. They found that note-taking while listening positively affected listening comprehension in all three instructional conditions. And noted that the participants might have used their short-term memory when answering the questions directed to them since the post-tests were administered just after the lectures (Gur, Dilci, Delican, & Coskun, 2013).

Tasai-Fu et al. (2010) in their paper “Effects of Note-Taking Instruction and Note-Taking Languages on College EFL Students’ Listening Comprehension” revealed the value and importance of explicit, sustained note-taking instruction. They have experimented with ESL students whose native language is Chinese. They investigated the effects of note-taking instruction (using the Cornell note-taking method) and note-taking language (English vs. Chinese) on Taiwanese college students’ English listening comprehension for two types of texts, specifically, short conversations and long lectures. A detailed and explicit note-taking instruction was given to the treatment group and at the end of the study, participants were given a content-based, objective listening comprehension test. Participants who took notes in English outperformed their peers, and those who received the combined effects of both instruction and taking note in English scored substantially higher than any other conditions. So, their paper reveals the value and importance of explicit, sustained note-taking instruction and suggested that for better comprehend both short conversation and long lectures, teachers should teach EFL learns how to take notes in an organized manner and encourage the use of English (Tsai-Fu & Wu, 2010).

Majid Hayati et al. (2009) in their research paper “The Impact of Note-taking Strategies on Listening Comprehension of EFL Learners” probed the relationship between note-taking strategy and students' listening comprehension ability. They have conducted the study through a language proficiency test on the undergraduate students majoring in English Translation at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, and found that students who took notes according to their own method showed lower level of language achievement than those who took notes on the basis of the Cornell method (Hayati & Jalilifar, 2009).

The earlier research works confirms the importance and need for note taking as a useful strategy to improve comprehension of listening material especially for the EFL learners. But for those adult ESL/ EFL learners who had no such practical training in listening to English, any particular note taking method while listening to a foreign language is also much difficult. So, flexible note taking while listening, especially of the content words and those emotional markers such as changes in tone and pitch of voice, could be encouraged so that leaners might not completely fall apart from their listening material.

1. **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The research aims at recognition and establishment of the listening strategy – flexible note taking while listening especially of the content words used in speech and emotional signals like tone and pitch of voice to improve comprehension and restoration of listening content in L2 (English) especially by adult ESL/EFL learners.

Since most of the adult ESL/ EFL leaners have no prior practice or strategic learning to improve listening as language skill, it has been often observed that to every non-native ESL learner, the linguistic use and social norms followed by a native speaker of English is unfamiliar and foreign. And listening being more a receptive skill, it unavoidably depends on pronunciation to a substantial extent (Tench, 1981). However, while listening to English pronunciation, the ESL learners often confront different phonetic and phonological problems that obviously hinder his/her learning and ultimately prevent him/her from acquiring expected general proficiency in the oral and auditory skills of the target language. Last but not the least, English being a stress-timed language, stressed syllables recur at equal intervals of time (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985). But many of languages like Bengali are a syllable-timed language having a speech rhythm in which all the syllables recur at equal intervals of time. And this difference between the two languages causes great difficulty to the non-native ESL learners especially in placing stress on the right syllable and using the appropriate tone, and thus hampers the encoding and decoding of information (Maniruzzaman, 2015). As a matter of fact, the pronunciation, pace and accent always remain foreign to ESL/ EFL learners. However, a flexible note taking method while listening to English (especially of the content words and the emotional markers) obviously help these adult learners to grasp, understand and restore those foreign content.

1. **METHODOLOGY**

The research paper is an outcome of an empirical study done with 194 adult learners from West Bengal, India. The research is carried out at Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Centenary College, Rahara, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

All of 194 participants who volunteered for the research experiment are from science background. They are under-graduate learners belonging to seven different streams – Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Botany, Zoology, Micro-Biology and Computer Science.

The age group of participants are between 17 years to 20 years.

Of the 195 research participants none speaks English as L1 and the other one speak Hindi as his mother tongue. The rest 194 learners speak Bengali as L1.

Of the total research population 89% had their primary and secondary schooling where the medium of instruction was vernacular or Bengali. The rest had their schooling at English Medium Schools. At their higher secondary level, another 17 of them shifted from Bengali medium schools to schools where the medium of instruction is English. Nevertheless, at majority of them are from Bengali medium schools where they were hardly exposed to English environment. They were taught in Bengali, and they communicated in and outside the classroom in Bengali as well.

These 194 learners were divided into two major group – the controlled group (101 learners) and the experimental group (93 learners). The experimental group were taught to take flexible notes especially of the content words and mark the emotional changes often by change of tone and pitch in voice before they could listen to the listening content in English.

All experiment is done in regular English language classroom.

* 1. **DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE**

The experiment is conducted in two phases for both groups –

At Phase 1, learners from both the groups are asked to listen to an audio extract taken from popular 2008 adventure based animated film Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa(Darnell & McGrath, 2008)and answer seven questions that are set keeping in mind three different listening goals – bottom-up, top-down, and parallel goal. The length of the audio extract was 4.51 minutes. A worksheet of seven questions based on the listening extract is used as an evaluation tool to assess the participant’s efficiency in listening.

Phase 2 was conducted after a week’s gap. This time an audio extract from popular Indian animation film in English – Hanuman to the Rescue (Parulkar, 2009) of same length 5.24 minutes was used as a listening material for both the groups. However, before the test the experimental group were first taught to take flexible notes especially of the content words and mark the emotional changes often by change of tone and pitch in voice; and are asked to take flexible notes while listening. After the test was conducted, a worksheet comprising of seven questions was distributed to them to once again assess whether the research participants had any improvement in understanding and restoring the listened content.

The experiment ended with feedback from each research participants.

* 1. **THE LISTENING GOALS AND ARRANGEMENT OF QUESTIONS**

Below are the details of the goals or targets that the participants are expected to achieve with required processing and schemata and the corresponding questions from both the animation films in English Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa (Darnell & McGrath, 2008) and Hanuman to the Rescue (Parulkar, 2009):

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Processing & Schemata requirement** | **Goals** | **Questions from the animated film Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa** | **Question from the animated film Hanuman to the Rescue** |
| **Bottom-Up Processing**  **& Language schemata to use** | Listening to any particular and significant content word especially requested | Q1. What is the message number? | Q5. Name the plant prescribed by the healer? |
| Identifying the Content word(s) that is stressed or chunked within a speech to make it a point most appropriate to the speech event | Q3. What is the place to Alex and to the Zebra? | Q3. Who is the best healer in the whole world? |
| Listening to the signal of the speaker’s intent and being aware of the lexical as well as supra-segmental markers within a speech | Q5. What does the mark say about Alex? | Q6. Write down the description of the plant as said by the healer? |
| **Top-Down Processing & Knowledge schemata to use** | Using knowledge of the topic to predict the content of the text | Q7. Could you write in your own words what might happen next? | Q1. What is the story all about? |
| Recognize the point of view or make inference | Q6. How do other Lion reacted after getting the news of Alex's return? | Q2. Why do the Monkeys and the Rakshasas seem surprised at times in the battlefield? |
| **Parallel Processing & Interactive schemata to use** | Using knowledge of the discourse or phrases to predict the emotional attribute or expression of the speaker | Q2. Could you find the mood of the animals present at the scene as they observe other animals below? | Q7. Seeing Hanuman Ravan start to contemplate about his journey. Identify the expressions kept by him? |
| Make inferences from expressions and emotions or a familiar word(s) | Q4. What was Alex trying to explain? | Q4. Could you find the difference between the present mental condition of Ram and that of the healer by the help of the tone and facial expression they use in the discussion? |

1. **RESULTS**
   1. **RESULTS OF PHASE 1**
      1. **RESULTS FROM CONTROLLED GROUP**

Following is the graphical representation of the accurate, incorrect and unattempted answers of the overall 101 research population from the controlled group who have listened to an audio extract taken from popular animation film in English – Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa(Darnell & McGrath, 2008) and answered seven questions that are set keeping in mind three different listening goals – bottom-up, top-down, and parallel goal. The length of the audio extract was 4.51 minutes.

**Table 1: Graphical representation of the percentage of accurate, incorrect and unattempted answers of the 101 research population from controlled group who have listened to only audio of Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa as listening material.**

With an audio extract taken from popular animated film in English – Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa(Darnell & McGrath, 2008), as a listening material, learners from controlled group had shown signs of lack of concentration in listening, lack of confidence and motivation. Their concentration broke drastically for the later part of their listening. They seem not to concentrate on listening content and found it difficult to connect to the situation, predict and infer about next situation to come.

Similar problems are also observed with the rest 93 participants from the experimental group who were yet used the note taking method while listening.

* + 1. **RESULTS FROM EXPERIMENTAL GROUP**

Following is the graphical representation of the accurate, incorrect and unattempted answers of the overall 93 research population from the experimental group who have listened to an audio extract taken from popular Indian animation film in English – Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa(Darnell & McGrath, 2008) and answered seven questions that are set keeping in mind three different listening goals – bottom-up, top-down, and parallel goal. The length of the audio extract was 4.51 minutes.

**Table 2: Graphical representation of the accurate, incorrect and unattempted answers of the 93 research population from experimental group who have listened to only audio of Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa as listening material.**

* 1. **RESULTS OF PHASE 2**

**5.2.1. RESULTS FROM CONTROLLED GROUP**

Following is the graphical representation of the accurate, incorrect and unattempted answers of the overall 101 research population from the controlled group who have listened to an audio extract taken from popular Indian animation film in English – Hanuman to the Rescue (Parulkar, 2009) and answered seven questions that are set keeping in mind three different listening goals – bottom-up, top-down, and parallel goal. The length of the audio extract was 5.24 minutes.

**Table 3: Graphical representation of the accurate, incorrect and unattempted answers of the 101 research population from controlled group who have listened to an audio extract of Hanuman to the Rescue as listening material.**

With an audio extract from popular Indian animation film in English – Hanuman to the Rescue (Parulkar, 2009), as a listening material, learners from controlled group had shown signs of improvement. Their confidence as well as motivation improved, but their concentration remained volatile and broke at the later stage as usual. Results show that they could connect to the situation, predict and infer. However, since with the audio they could not observe the characters visually, they found it difficult to be accurate about the expressions of the characters.

**5.2.2. RESULTS FROM EXPERIMENTAL GROUP WHO TOOK FLEXIBLE NOTES WHILE LISTENING.**

Following is the graphical representation of the accurate, incorrect and unattempted answers of the overall 93 research population from the experimental group who have listened to an audio extract taken from popular Indian animation film in English – Hanuman to the Rescue (Parulkar, 2009) and took flexible notes while listening. They have answered seven questions that are set keeping in mind three different listening goals – bottom-up, top-down, and parallel goal. The length of the audio extract was 5.24 minutes.

**Table 4: Graphical representation of the accurate, incorrect and unattempted answers of the 93 research population from experimental group who have listened to an audio extract from Hanuman to the Rescue as listening material. They took flexible notes while listening.**

With flexible note taking method while listening, learners from experimental group had shown signs of serious improvement. They show sign of prolonged concentration, accurate understanding and long restoration of the facts. They show confidence and remained motivated to listen to the audio extract from popular Indian animation film in English – Hanuman to the Rescue (Parulkar, 2009). Results not only show that their concentration on listening content increased appreciably, more so, they could easily connect to the situation, predict and infer about next situation to come. With emotional markers they could also observe emotional changes almost accurately. However, a visibility of the characters could be of more help to accurately write about the expressions of the characters appreciably.

1. **DISCUSSION**

As already said, listening as a language skill whether in and outside the language classroom require attentive receiving of auditory as well as visual stimuli through eyes and ears, comprehension of the information and the intention of the speaker and at least a short-term restoration of the same and then an appropriate response. Now teaching and learning of listening skills in language classrooms are often done with audio podcasts which are generally formal and not like the general conversations that we often do and come across in our daily life.

In human communication, there are situations where only a gist of the entire speech is sufficient to listen, but in other, it would become difficult to communicate back or make appropriate responses without the specific information and intention of the speaker. Inferring the speaker’s opinion, making critical evaluation and discrimination are the other activities an effective listener might have to do while listening (Moulic, 2012).

G. Brown and G. Yule categorized language functions into two major divisions – Language for transactional or ideational purpose and language for interactional or interpersonal purpose. Where transactional language is message oriented and can be viewed as business type talk with the focus on content and conveying factual or propositional information. Transactional language is used for giving instruction, explaining, describing, giving directions, ordering, inquiring, requesting, checking on the correctness of details and verifying understanding. The interactional language is social type talk. It is person oriented than message oriented, and its objective is to establish and maintain cordial social relationships (Brown & Yule, 1983).

So, to improve listening skills among adult learners it is not enough to only practice listening through formal podcasts. Rather, interesting, authentic and interactive listening materials are truly useful. In every communication we have two types of lexis – function words (closed-class words that play a grammatical role) and content words (open-class, semantically richer words) (Bell , Brenier, Gregory, Girand, & Jurafsky, 2009). And each communication is marked by emotions that often get expressed through eye and facial expressions, gestures, postures, body languages, proxemics etc. So, to provide a truly useful practice of listening in language classroom and to improve effective listening skills, it is a necessity that we give learners authentic listening materials to listen.

But passive hearing is not listening at all. Learners need to be attentive, listen, comprehend, restore and respond. So, each learner needs to get a thorough practice of the same while listening. As already said, since these adult learners had no prior practice in listening English in their primary, secondary or higher secondary level or education, so it becomes truly difficult for them to even concentrate on the listening material in English while listening. So is the effort taken to train these adult learners to take flexible notes, especially of the content words and the emotional markers like happiness, sadness, fear, and anger (Gu, Wang, Patel, Bourgeois, & Huang, 2019), the four basic emotions of human through changes in tone and pitch of voices.

The study clearly reveals that with flexible note taking there is a marked difference in results among the experimental group. At Phase 1, where for both the groups (controlled as well as experimental) the average accurate answers were 30.12% for controlled group and 29.80% for the experimental group, with Indian animation films at Phase 2, the average accurate answers raised to 58.27% for the controlled group, where as it is 81.41% for the experimental group who have taken flexible notes while listening.

The experiment also revealed that Indian adult learners who have whether in controlled group or experimental group had prolonged concentration and better understanding of the Indian English than that of the native variety.

While giving away their feedback after their second phase of listening most of the adult learners complained of pronunciation problem especially with the foreign variety. During listening to the audio extract in both phases, learners had shown tendencies of a gradual deficiency in their concentration while listening. However, in Phase 1, while listening from Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa(Darnell & McGrath, 2008)***,*** most of the leaners from both controlled or experimental group could not write the answer to the third question – “What is the place to Alex and to the Zebra?” Few could listen and comprehend the typical pronunciation of “San Diego” and “Déjà vu.” On an average 68.5% of the total research population spelled it incorrectly while answering the question.

If we consider the last three questions of Phase 1, on an average about 62.70% of the controlled group and 64.15% of the total experimental group failed to even attempt the questions. Where as at Phase 2, considering the last three questions, the average population who left the questions attempted is quite low. It is only 10.39% with the experimental group of population who took flexible notes.

1. **LIMITATION**

One major limitation of the experiment is the use of audio extract for listening. As already stated, listening practices is often done not only to help the learners process bottom-up goals through language schemata, but also top-down goals and parallel goals through knowledge and interactive schemata respectively.

To test top-down processing ability where learners use their knowledge schemata, learners are given such questions where they may use the knowledge of the topic to predict the content of the text or recognize the point of view or make inference. For parallel processing through interactive schemata learners are supposed to use knowledge of the discourse or phrases to predict the emotional attribute or expression of the speaker or make inferences from expressions and emotions or a familiar word(s). But it is truly very difficult to make use of knowledge schemata or interactive schemata and make inferences if the eye and facial expressions cannot be observed through eyes while listening.

Perhaps that is why learners from both groups (controlled group and experimental group) the 2nd and 7th question from Hanuman to the Rescue (Parulkar, 2009) cannot be answered by most. 2nd question – “Why do the Monkeys and the Rakshasas seem surprised at times in the battlefield?” and 7th question – “Seeing Hanuman Ravan start to contemplate about his journey. Identify the expressions kept by him?” could have been easily answered if learners could have got an opportunity to see the expressions of the characters. On an average only 33.66% of the controlled group could be accurate about why the monkeys and the rakshasas were surprised in the battlefield. The average increased to 61.25% with the learners from experimental group as they have been taught about the emotional markers prior to the listening test.

1. **CONCLUSION**

"**Listening**" as a language skill involves proper attention and motivation, reception of information as well as intention of the speaker through eyes and ears, identification of language (both the segmental and supra – segmental elements) and appropriate understanding of the speaker’s data and purposes, retention of that message and intention, and finally making an appropriate response.

In countries like India, especially in a state like West Bengal, learners are not encouraged to study in English medium schools. They often go to schools where the medium of instruction is primarily in vernacular – Bengali or Hindi. Thus, most of them find it difficult to listen, comprehend, restore, and respond to English language activities at the language classroom at their graduation or tertiary level. They show signs of lack of confidence and capability to listen and understand the information as well as the intention of the speaker. They hesitate, faulter and often remain demotivated whenever asked to accomplish a listening task.

But it has been observed that with with flexible note taking while listening, these ESL/ EFL adult learners could have handy written contents of what they have listened to moments ago, for their better understanding of the content and restoration of the same.

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