In this article I will briefly focus on how I try to develop listening skills with our young learners who are learning English as an additional language. I will identify a number of learning theories, together with a list of considerations and cautions with some insights that I have gained from trying to make listening in my classroom more comprehensible.

- The nature of listening
- Why we need to develop listening skills
- Theories I consider when I develop listening skills
- Some considerations for classroom listening
- What I do to be more comprehensible
- Conclusion

The nature of listening

'Listening is an active not a passive operation.' Garvie. With this in mind I would like to emphasise three things:

- The importance of understanding this concept of listening being an active engagement. That is, as a listener, the mind is actively searching for meaning.
- The importance of what Krashen calls 'comprehensible input' (CI) or that 'we acquire when we understand what people tell us or what we read, when we are absorbed in the message.' Individual progress is dependent on the input containing aspects of the target language that 'the acquirer has not yet acquired, but is developmentally ready to acquire.'
  - This seems to imply the importance of ensuring that the language level is matched to the learners, which means teachers must understand their learners' abilities.
- Krashen advises that acquisition proceeds best when 'the acquirer's level of anxiety is low and self-confidence is high.'
This seems to enforce the importance of making the learning environment in our classrooms non-threatening.

**Why we need to develop listening skills**

'If someone is giving you a message or opinion, then of course you have to be able to understand it in order to respond.' (Brewster, Ellis, Girard).

- Listening skills need to have a 'real-life' meaning, Donaldson says that children need 'purposes and intentions' which they can recognise and respond to in others 'these human intentions are the matrix in which the child's thinking is embedded.'
- This implies that we need to carefully select materials and purposes for practising listening skills and that they need to have an authentic meaning to young learners.

**Theories I consider when I develop listening skills**

Keeping in mind that listening is an active process, Brewster, Ellis and Girard caution that asking children to 'listen and remember' can make them 'anxious, places a great strain on their memory and tends not to develop listening skills.'

The teacher would support children's understanding more effectively, if they direct their pupils' attention to specific points that have to be listened for 'using activities that actively support learners' understanding and guide their attention to specific parts of the spoken text.'

Wells says a lot of children's learning 'is dependent on making connections between that they know and what they are able to understand in the speech they hear' but they don't learn only listening, motivation for learning language is to be able to communicate 'using all the resources they have already acquired to interact with other people about their needs and interests.' This seems to be in line with social constructivist theories.

1. Piaget believed that a young learner 'constructs' or builds understanding over time.
2. Vygotsky believed that learning was ahead of development and for development to occur, interaction with adults or peers who are more knowledgeable is needed. This has been termed the 'zone of proximal development'.
3. Bruner extended Vygotsky's ZPD theory by defining the role of the more knowledgeable 'other' as someone who is actively involved in the learning processes by closing the gap between what has been partially and fully understood. This has been termed
Some considerations for classroom listening

These are some of the things I consider when I try to develop my students' listening. (Brewster, Ellis & Girard)

- Give the children confidence. We should not expect them to always understand every word and they should know this.
- Explain why the children have to listen. Make sure the learners are clear about why they are listening, what the main point or purpose of the activity is.
- Help children develop specific strategies for listening. An important strategy that the teacher should teach is 'intelligent guesswork'. Pupils are used to drawing on their background knowledge to work out something they are not sure of.
- Set specific listening tasks. I try to think of listening in three stages, pre-listening, while-listening, post listening and have activities for each stage.
- Listening does not have to rely on the availability of a cassette or pre-recorded material. Most listening is teacher talk.

What I do to be more comprehensible

There are a number of ways that I try to make myself easier to understand.

- Keep sentences short and grammatically simple
- Use exaggerated intonation to hold the child's attention
- Emphasise key words
- Limiting the topics talked about to what is familiar to the child
- Frequently repeating and paraphrasing

Conclusion

Listening is an active process, as the mind actively engages in making meaning. It is therefore our duty as teachers to ensure that the materials we use are comprehensible to our young learners, as well as within the range of what they are developmentally ready for. Listening is also hard work! And can be stressful! So in order to maximise the potential for acquisition of language, we need to ensure that our young learners are not stressed about this process.
Further reading


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http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/listening-young-learners