



A COME-BACK TO LISTENING IN THE EFLT: THE SOLICITED BUT NEGLECTED SKILL

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Abstract:

By scholarly consensus, listening is a fundamental language-related skill. It is closely linked to and affected by other language skills, such as speaking, reading, and writing. The focus of language learning was initially on written communication. Slowly but surely, listening started to gain ground as a solicited skill for learners. Several theories and methods have cropped up to suggest new techniques and strategies geared toward fostering learners' listening efficacy. However, the applicability of these methods to listening is far from being a challenge-free endeavour. Morocco-wise, there seems to be less focus on listening, and this is ascribed to various factors. Within this vein, this paper addresses listening-bound challenges liable to thwart the implementation of this important skill. The paper connects the dots around listening in the EFL context. The outcome of this review paper indicates that listening goes uncatered for in the Moroccan EFL settings. The fact of overlooking this skill is motivated by subjective and objective opinions.

Keywords: listening skill, language learning, foreign language teaching, neglect of listening skill

1. Introduction

Language serves as a crucial means of expressing our emotions and ideas (Vygotsky, 1962, p.44). As the most widely spoken and influential language worldwide, English holds immense significance that cannot be overlooked (Blank, 2023). This has resulted in a growing interest among academic researchers all over the world to study English teaching methods (Richards & Renandya, 2008, pp. 5-6), such as teaching programs and strategies, curricula, and students' attitudes towards learning English. Among the four skills in the English language, which also include writing, speaking, and reading, listening is one of the most crucial components (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). According to

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Darti and Asmawati (2017), good listening skills can improve other language skills significantly. Additionally, for individuals who speak English as a foreign language, daily exposure to the language through listening is essential for effective communication. As a matter of fact, language learning heavily relies on the development of listening skills as it provides learners with language input (Darti & Asmawati, 2017; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). This is also due to the fact that it helps to acquire pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary, and syntax. Correspondingly, without listening, it may not be possible to acquire the English language. Nevertheless, the process of developing listening skills can be challenging for learners due to the requirement of concentration and the inconsistency in English pronunciation. As a result, many learners consider listening to be the most difficult language skill to learn (Abdalhamid, 2012; Darti & Asmawati, 2017; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

However, listening was and still is a neglected skill in language classrooms, with more emphasis given to reading and grammar instruction. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), listening was not considered a significant feature of language teaching until the late 1960s. As Field (2008) notes, during the early days of English Language Teaching (ELT), listening was mainly used as a means of introducing new grammar through model dialogues. The neglect of listening skills in language teaching is still a problem that needs to be addressed. As language learners progress, they require more sophisticated listening skills to comprehend native speakers and engage with more complex language structures. This review article sheds light on the critical role of listening in language learning and highlights the issue of its lack of attention in language teaching. The purpose of this review is to raise awareness among language teachers and educators about the importance of listening as a fundamental component of language learning and to encourage them to incorporate effective listening strategies in their teaching practices. The article explores the reasons why listening skills are often overlooked in language teaching, such as the focus on reading and writing skills, limited resources, and inadequate teacher training. Additionally, the article provides insights into the impact of poor listening skills on learners, such as reduced fluency and limited vocabulary acquisition. Ultimately, the article seeks to promote the idea that listening should be given equal importance compared to other language skills, due to the lack of applicability both in Moroccan schools and in research. The study also encourages language teachers to prioritize the development of the listening abilities of their students.

2. The Importance of Listening Skills in Language Learning

Listening is a multifaceted skill that requires the learner to be able to understand the spoken language, interpret the meaning of it, and respond to the speaker. Its significance in EFL learning cannot be overstated. Peterson (2001) states that "*listening is the foundation of language learning*" (p.2). Listening is a crucial part of daily life, as it allows people to receive information. Rost (2013) defines listening as a complex process that enables individuals to comprehend spoken language, which is not only important for effective communication but also for understanding the world around us. Anderson, and Lynch

(1988) explain that listeners play a critical role in the listening process by applying their knowledge to what they hear to understand what speakers mean. In the same mode, Guo and Wills (2006) state that it is through listening that individuals gain a significant proportion of their education, information, and understanding of the world and human affairs, as well as their ideals and sense of values. Mendelson (1994) provides statistics on the time spent on different communication activities, stating that listening constitutes 40-50% of the total time, followed by speaking (25-30%), reading (11-16%), and writing (about 9%). Peterson (2001) underscores the significance of listening in language learning. She contends that no other form of language input is as effortless to process as spoken language received through listening. By listening, learners can develop an understanding of the inner workings of language systems at various levels, which then serves as a foundation for more fluent productive skills.

Listening is essential not only in everyday life but also in the classroom. Anderson and Lynch (2003) argue that people often underestimate the remarkable feats of listening that they achieve in familiar contexts and only become aware of their limitations in unfamiliar listening environments, such as when listening to a language they have limited proficiency. While some individuals may believe that speaking and writing in a second language indicates mastery of the language, it is crucial to have effective listening skills to communicate successfully. In language learning, listening is considered a fundamental skill. Nunan (1998) notes that more than half of the time spent by students in a foreign language is devoted to listening. Rost (1994) provides further insight into the importance of listening in language classrooms. He asserts that listening is vital because it provides input for learners to start learning. Besides, he explains that learners must interact to achieve understanding; therefore, access to speakers of the language is necessary, since authentic spoken language presents a challenge for learners to understand the language as native speakers use it. In this respect, he mentions that learners' failure to understand the language they hear can be an impetus for interaction and learning. From another scale, he maintains that listening exercises can serve as a means for teachers to draw learners' attention to new forms of language, such as vocabulary, grammar, and new interaction patterns. Hence, listening plays a crucial role in language learning and academic settings, facilitating communication and understanding.

Although listening plays a crucial role in the enhancement of both communicative and cognitive abilities, it was not integrated into the language teaching syllabus until the 1970s (Rost, 1990). Researchers and language teachers prioritized reading and grammar instruction over teaching listening, and it wasn't considered a vital aspect of language teaching (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Nonetheless, in recent times, language programs have begun to recognize the importance of listening in communication-based language teaching.

3. The Challenges of Teaching Listening

Yagang (1994) identifies four factors that contribute to problems in listening: the message, the speaker, the listener, and the physical setting. These problems are believed to be caused by factors such as speech rate, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Meanwhile, Flowerdew & Miller (1996) suggests that the challenges faced by students in listening include the speed of delivery, new terminology and concepts, difficulty in focusing, and the physical environment. Higgings (1995) states that the main reasons why learners feel listening difficult are the following:

- 1) Lack of effort to understand each and every word while listening. Especially in the case of L2 acquisition they are unable to transfer their L1 skill easily to a second language.
- 2) Failure or laziness to build up their vocabulary gradually: This greatly reflects in their listening and keeps them low-spirited in acquiring language skills.
- 3) Listeners' challenges in dealing with different types of pronunciation and accents: this is due to the fact that they stick to one particular articulation.
- 4) Listeners' concentration power or listening stamina greatly influences their listening skills: This is not so in the case of acquiring the other language skills (reading, speaking, and writing) even when they are carried for a longer period of time.
- 5) Distraction by the physical setting or the environment in which listening is to be carried out.

This becomes an added challenge for an average learner and a main challenge even for good listeners. Lastly, engaging in listening activities can often create feelings of anxiety and stress among language learners, as they require active participation in interpersonal and interpretive communication modes. Unlike other language skills, listening is not completely under the learner's control and can occur at varying speeds, which can be challenging for the listener.

Even with all of the technological advances in the realm of education, learners still struggle with listening. This is primarily due to the fact that insufficient time is devoted to improving their listening abilities and unsuitable techniques in a learning context may be a contributing factor to their poor listening comprehension.

4. Neglecting Listening in Language Teaching: The Underpinnings

EFL listening competence is viewed as a challenging language skill, particularly in a foreign language situation where real-life opportunities for practice are limited (Nowrouzi, Tam, Zareian, & Nimehchisalem, 2015). In the Moroccan EFL context, the pedagogical guidelines (2007) claim that teachers must focus on listening for 'comprehension' and listening for 'acquisition' to ensure that students acquire listening abilities as well as linguistic repertoire. Besides, the guidelines suggest that listening should be taught on a regular basis and tested through performance-based evaluation. Regardless of the elevated status of listening in official documents, the prevalent

perception among ELT experts in Morocco is that English teachers neither teach nor assess listening (Youssef & Baghdadi, 2022). In their study, Youssef and Baghdadi (2022) confirm that teachers never teach listening.

Previous studies have identified several reasons why listening is often neglected in language teaching. Based on Mendelson (1994), there are three reasons why teaching listening skills were insufficient. Initially, teaching listening was not regarded as a distinct skill that should be explicitly taught for an extended period. Proponents of this notion contend that language learners would enhance their listening abilities independently while listening to the instructor throughout the day. Second, teachers were unsure of how to teach listening effectively. Lastly, the conventional materials used for language teaching were inadequate in teaching listening skills. To continue, Rost and Wilson (2013) maintain that, one key reason is the lack of understanding of what effective listening involves. Teachers may view listening as a passive skill that requires minimal effort, rather than an active skill that requires practice and development. This can lead to a lack of explicit instruction and focus on listening skill. Additionally, Richards and Renandya (2002) find that teachers may prioritize speaking and reading skills, as these are often seen as more visible and easier to assess than listening skills. This is reinforced by Nunan's (1998) observation that listening is often tested in a way that does not reflect its importance in real-life communication. Furthermore, Vandergrift and Baker (2015) note that the assumption that listening is a natural and intuitive skill can lead to a lack of explicit instruction and focus in language teaching. Finally, a lack of resources and training for teachers to effectively teach and assess listening skills can also contribute to its neglect (Brown, 2008). Many language instruction materials focus on reading and writing skills, making it difficult for teachers to find authentic listening resources. Moreover, the materials that are available for listening tend to be of low quality and not suited for language learners of all levels, which can make it difficult for teachers to incorporate listening into their lesson plans. As stated by Buck (2001), "*listening materials are often inadequate or simply not available*" (p. 54). One more reason is the lack of teacher training in effective listening instruction. Vandergrift and Baker (2015) note in their study that many teachers lack training in listening instruction, leading to challenges in student learning. Similarly, a study by Auerbach (2018) found that teacher education programs often do not prioritize training in listening instruction, leaving many teachers ill-equipped to teach this important skill to their students. These findings are supported by the work of other researchers in the field of education, including Vandergrift (2019) and Fielding-Wells and Gunstone (2013), who have also identified the need for increased training in effective listening instruction for teachers. Overall, the research suggests that addressing the lack of teacher training in listening instruction is an important step toward improving student success in the classroom. These factors combined can result in a neglect of listening skill in language teaching, despite their crucial role in effective communication. It is clear that listening is a neglected skill in language teaching. The difficulty of teaching listening, the lack of available resources, and the lack of teacher training all contribute to this neglect. To ensure that all language learners become

proficient listeners, teachers should invest more time and resources into listening instruction.

5. The Downside of Poor Listening Skills

Poor listening skills can have a negative impact on learners in multiple ways. Firstly, students with poor listening skills often have difficulty following instructions, taking notes, and retaining information presented in class. This can result in lower academic achievement, decreased self-esteem, and increased anxiety (Boyle & Hanna, 2017). Additionally, poor listening skills can affect learners' communication and collaboration abilities. According to Kolb and Kolb (2017), poor listening skills can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and poor teamwork. This can impede learners' social and emotional development. Again, according to a study by Goh and Kwang (2017), learners with poor listening skills may experience difficulties in recognizing words, processing the meaning of the message, and retaining information. These difficulties can impede the development of their vocabulary and language proficiency. In the same line of thought, research by Weber and Rinck (2016) has shown that poor listening skills can result in reduced fluency and affect learners' ability to express themselves clearly and coherently. Thus, developing strong listening skills is essential for learners to acquire and use new vocabulary and to develop fluency in a language. This suggests that it is important for educators to promote active listening skills among learners to enhance their academic performance and social skills. Educators can achieve this by modeling effective listening, using active listening strategies, and providing learners with opportunities to practice their listening skills.

6. Conclusion

In today's world, effective communication is more critical than ever, and language learning is a crucial component of this process. However, despite the essential role that listening plays in communication, it is often overlooked in language teaching. As a result, language learners may struggle with comprehension, communication, and overall language proficiency. The neglect of listening in language teaching is a complex issue that can stem from a variety of factors. One of the primary reasons for this neglect is the emphasis on other language skills, namely reading, writing, and speaking. These skills are often given more attention in language instruction, leaving listening as a secondary consideration. In addition, many language educators lack the training and resources to develop effective listening instruction and assessment. The neglect of listening in language teaching can have significant negative impacts on language learners. Without adequate listening skills, learners may struggle to comprehend spoken language and communicate effectively with native speakers. This can lead to frustration and a lack of motivation, which can further hinder their language learning progress. Moreover, learners who do not receive adequate listening instruction may develop gaps in their language skills, leading to an incomplete and ineffective understanding of the language.

To address this issue, it is essential to prioritize listening in language teaching. This can involve incorporating more listening activities into lessons, such as listening to podcasts, music, watching videos, and participating in listening exercises. In addition, teachers can provide learners with feedback on their listening performance to help them identify areas for improvement and develop effective listening strategies. It is also crucial for policymakers to recognize the importance of listening in language education and support efforts to improve listening instruction and assessment. This may include providing resources for teacher training, promoting the development of listening-focused curricula, and incorporating listening proficiency into language proficiency exams. In conclusion, neglecting listening in language teaching is a dis-service to language learners and can hinder their ability to communicate effectively in the target language. By prioritizing listening instruction and assessment, educators and policymakers can help learners develop a more comprehensive and effective set of language skills, leading to improved communication and greater language proficiency. Ultimately, this can have positive impacts on their personal and professional lives and contribute to a more interconnected and culturally diverse world.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Authors

Najib Slimani (PhD) is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Cadi Ayyad University Marrakech, Morocco. As a language tutor for over three decades, Dr. Slimani has taught English Within and across educational levels, namely Secondary Education, Vocational Higher Education, and Mainstream Higher Education. His field of expertise is Linguistics, Discourse Studies, and Translation Studies. His teaching experience ranges from teaching in Undergraduate programs through Graduate programs to Post-graduate programs. His teaching experience has got an international dimension since he served for The International Center for Educational Exchange as a tutor of American students from renowned universities and colleges, namely John Hopkins and Pennsylvania. Dr. Slimani's publications cover a wide range of disciplines such as Applied Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Socio-linguistics, and Sociology.

Nada El Idrissi Moubtassim is an English language high school teacher, a PhD student, and a strong advocate for innovative approaches to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning and teaching. Her research on the effectiveness of songs and podcasts on listening comprehension in EFL classrooms for high school students. Concurrently with her academic pursuit, she actively engages in collaborative efforts with her fellow English language teachers within the school setting, purposefully organising a myriad of activities intended to enhance the overall learning experience for their students. Beyond her local efforts, she is also an avid participant in Missouri State University's Global Teacher Education Exchange program. Engaging in cross-cultural communication and

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