

## Significance of Listening Skill in the ESL and EFL Context

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දෙවන භාෂාවක් ලෙස කිසියම් භාෂාවක් ඉගැන්වීමේදී ශ්‍රවණ මාධ්‍ය ඉතා මහෝපකාරී වේ. පර්යේෂකයන් වර්ෂ 1960 පමණ වන තෙක් ශ්‍රවණ නිපුණතාව විශේෂිත ඒකකයක් ලෙස දෙවන භාෂාවක් ඉගැන්වීමේ ක්‍රියාවලියේදී යොදා නොගැනූ අතර එය හුදෙක්, දෙබස් ඉගැන්වීම සහ ව්‍යාකරණ ඉගැන්වීම සඳහා පමණක් යොදා ගැනිණි. තවද ප්‍රතිග්‍රාහී නිපුණතාවයන් (Receptive skills) සඳහා කෙරෙන අවධාරණය උත්පාදක නිපුණතාවයන් (Productive Skills) සඳහා කෙරෙන අවධාරණයට සාපේක්ෂව අඩු විය. මෙසේ වීමට හේතුව වූයේ පළමු භාෂාවක් ඉගැන්වීමේදී කථනය සහ ශ්‍රවණය යන නිපුණතාවන් සඳහා කෙරෙන අවධාරණය ඉතා අල්ප වීමයි. දෙවන භාෂාවක් ඉගැන්වීමේදී ශ්‍රවණ නිපුණතාවය සඳහා ඉතා ඉහල පිළිගැනීමක් ගුරුවරුන් සහ පර්යේෂකයන් ලබා දෙන අතර ඒ හා සම්බන්ධ කෙරෙන පර්යේෂණ ඉහල යමින් පවතී. ඉංග්‍රීසි, දෙවන භාෂාවක් ලෙස හෝ විදේශ භාෂාවක් ලෙස ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ විශ්වවිද්‍යාල තුළ ඉගැන්වීමේදී ශ්‍රවණ නිපුණතාව සඳහා ඉතා අඩු අවධාරණයක් ලබා දෙන බව පෙනී යයි. මෙම ශ්‍රාස්ත්‍රීය ලිපිය මගින් ශ්‍රවණ නිපුණතාවයේ හැසිරීම, එහි අරමුණු, පංති කාමරයේ දේශන ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාවෙන් පැවැත්වීම සහ ශ්‍රවණ නිපුණතාව එහිදී වැදගත් වන ආකාරය සහ සිසුන්ට ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාවෙන් පැවැත්වෙන දේශන අවබෝධ කර ගැනීම සඳහා ඉගෙනුම් උපාය මාර්ගයන් (Learning Strategies) වල දායකත්වය විග්‍රහ කරයි.

යොමු වචන :- මව් භාෂාව, දෙවන භාෂා ඉගෙනීම, විදේශ භාෂා ඉගෙනීම, ශ්‍රවණ නිපුණතාව, ඉගෙනුම් උපාය මාර්ගයන්.

### Introduction

The emphasis placed on listening in second language teaching tended to be poor for many years. Earlier, the concern of the teaching methods was to prioritize productive skills such as speaking and writing and the relationship between the productive and receptive skills was poorly understood. As Nunan points out,

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being able to speak and write in the second language could be considered as a knowledge of the language concerned. Listening and reading are therefore secondary skills. The poor concern for listening by applied linguists was originated from the fact that listening skill could be acquired by exposure to the language but really not taught (Nunan 2002:238). Probably this assumption resulted from the belief of L1 acquisition where listening skill is placed as a receptive skill which is not taught. However, in the recent past, the theoretical developments in language learning and teaching and the emergence of EFL courses placed a high interest in the role of listening comprehension.

Listening comprehension and the skill of listening in language learning and teaching is gaining its importance in the recent research in the English language teaching (ELT). As Vandergrift points out, listening as a separate and distinct component in language learning only came into focus after significant debate and discussion on its validity (Vandergrift 1999). Listening is probably the most crucial of the four language skills, making it the most difficult skill to learn. It involves cognitive processes and psychological processes at different stages of listening (Field 2002; Lynch 2002). Listening comprehension was considered as a passive activity and the researchers did not pay much attention to merit its importance (Vandergrift 2004). As Rubin points out, listening is a covert activity and has heavy processing demands. Given the challenges resulting from the complexities of second language teaching, its time to explore the contributory nature of listening skill towards English language teaching.

### ***The process of listening***

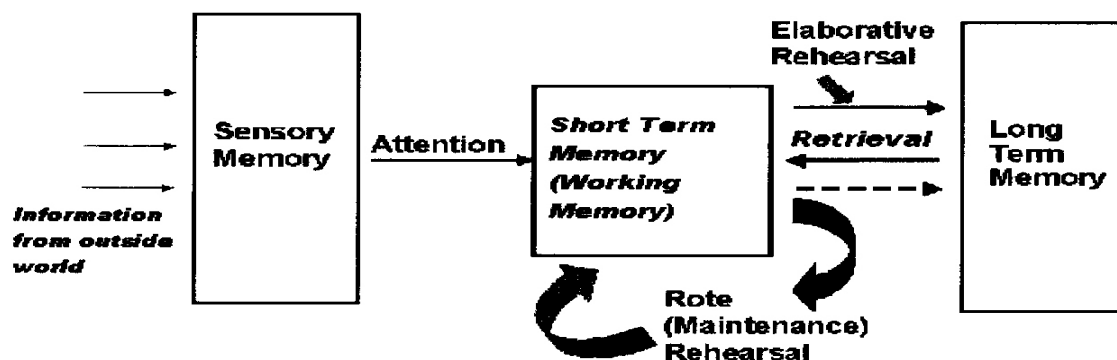
In the process of listening, listeners need to attempt to make sense of information at the same time the listeners internalize the information. It was assumed that through repetition and imitation, learner's ability to comprehend spoken language would develop. Though this can be true for L1 listening, the image of L2 listening comprehension is changing. Language learners, who want to learn to understand spoken texts in the target language and to interact with native speakers, underscored the utility of listening instruction (Kim, 2002). According to Vandergrift, listening is probably the least explicit of the four language skills and it is the most difficult skill to learn (Vandergrift 2004). Vandergrift elaborated the complexity of listening and the explanation thus includes:

*Listening comprehension is anything but a passive activity. It is a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds,*

*understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance. Coordinating all of this involves a great deal of mental activity on the part of the listener. Listening is hard work, and deserves more analysis and support.*  
(Vandergrift 1999)

“Three-box Model of Memory” as seen in figure 1, shows that various listening inputs from outside world go through human ears. This information is caught by the Sensory Memory. At this stage, the information (inputs) is given attention and is sent to Short Term Memory. At this stage, rehearsal or repetition is needed if it is to be remembered. Rehearsal can be done either through elaborative practice or memorization of information which can be sent to long term memory so that information can be retained longer (Brown 2008).

**Figure 1. Three-Box Model of Memory (Brown, 2008)**



As seen in figure 1, the listening process goes through five stages: sensory memory, attention, short-term memory (working memory), rehearsal, and long-term memory. The model of listening proposed by Klatzky too is similar to that of Brown (Klatzky 1980: Brown 2008). According to Klatzky, listening process takes place in five stages. In the first stage, the information registration takes place. Then, pattern recognition takes place. After pattern recognition, information registration happens. The last two are the rehearsal and information preservation (Klatzky 1980). Both the models have similarities in common and it is apparent that attention (pattern recognition) and rehearsal are important to retain information in the long term memory. Therefore, it is implied that in teaching listening skill, students need to be involved in listening activities that require undivided attention. Further, opportunities are needed for students to

listen repeatedly that facilitate the recognition of the message conveyed in the listening material.

Listening is now recognized as an active process, critical to L2 acquisition and deserving of systematic development as a skill in its own right. It is apparent that listening is assuming greater and greater importance in foreign language classrooms ( Morley 1999). There are several reasons for this popularity as second language acquisition research has given a major boost to listening (Nunan (2002). In the 1980s, when Krashan's ideas about comprehensible input gained prominence, it gave a major boost to listening (Krashan 1982). Listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin (Rost 1994:141-142).

L2 listening has been considered from different angles based on theoretical bases. Structuralists considered that language learning takes a linear process ( Rivers 1968). As the traditional form of skills separation takes the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, structuralists considered that language learning starts with the oral medium skills such as listening and moves to the other skills later. It is clear that, according to structuralists' view of language learning, accumulation of micro skills results in acquisition of language proficiency. Contrary to the structuralist view, a different view was that language is learned as an integrative process and the foundation of it was that all conventional skills are introduced simultaneously (Oller, 1979). This view underpinned communicative methodologies.

Two dimensions of listening comprehension processes have dominated language pedagogy since the early 1980s. They are the bottom-up processing view and the top-down interpretation view. In the bottom-up processing model, listening is a process of decoding the sounds that one hears in a linear fashion, from the smallest meaningful units such as phonemes to complete full texts. According to this view, phonemic units are decoded and linked together to form words, words are linked together to form phrases, phrases are linked together to form utterances, and utterances are linked together to form complete meaningful texts. Hence, this is a linear process in which meaning itself is derived as the final step of the listening process. Bottom-up processing is similar to "listener as tape recorder" of listening because it assumes that the listener takes in and stores messages similar to a tape recorder ( Anderson and Lynch 1988).

The top-down process assumes that the listener actively reconstructs the original meaning of the speaker using incoming sounds as sources. In this process, the listener uses prior knowledge of the context and situation within which the listening takes place to make sense of what is heard. In order to elaborate further, the context and situation in listening assumes that knowledge of the topic at hand, the speaker or the speakers, their relationship to the situation, as well as to each other and prior events are included in the process. Whether there is a greater preference for bottom-up or top-down processing in the pedagogical views or among listeners of different proficiency levels has led to contradictory views in various pieces of research (Field 2004; Vogely 1995). Nunan suggested that successful listening comprehension relies on the integration of both bottom-up and top-down facet (Nunan 2002: 239).

### ***Purposes of listening***

Listening always underpins a purpose. Purposes of listening vary according to whether learners are involved or not in listening as a component of social interaction. Functions or purposes of listening can be classified as interactional or transactional. Interactional listening is to engage in social interaction while the purpose of transactional listening is primarily to communicate information. Unlike in interactional listening, accurate and coherent communication of the message is required in transactional listening and it is important for the listener to get the direct message in situations such as news broadcasts, lectures, instructions and descriptions (Brown and Yule 1983). Academic listening involving listening and speaking tasks particularly at university level is a common aspect of transactional listening. Contrary to interactional listening in which social interaction takes place, academic listening has its own characteristics and places specific demands upon listeners (Flowerdew, 1994). In order to be a successful academic listener, a student needs relevant background knowledge, the ability to distinguish between important and unimportant information and skills related to note-taking.

The purpose of listening gives insight to the variables affecting the process of listening and the strategies to be used in different listening situations. In order to get general information of a news broadcast, it involves certain processes and strategies in listening whereas when it is required to get specific information from the news broadcast, the involvement of the processes and strategies will vary. Further, listening to a sequence of instructions requires different listening skills from listening to a poem.

Listening can be characterized as reciprocal and nonreciprocal. In reciprocal listening, the listener is also required to take part in the interaction. However, in a monologue, the listener is placed in a passive mood in which the situation does not demand for the listener to interact. The listener has no opportunity of classifying understanding, answering back or checking for comprehension. Real –world listening involves important characteristics as listening input (Nunan 2004:239).

### ***Devises used in listening***

Special features such as time-creating devices, facilitation devices, and compensation devices facilitate the listening process in real- world listening input so that real life communication becomes more effective. Time creating devices are used to ease the production of speech (Wendy 2004: 248-249). As Wu points out, these devices are used to process and gain ample time by the speaker in order to plan what to say next in spontaneous speech (Wu 1993). The speech markers identified by Olynak are typical examples of time-creating devices in listening and that the occurrence of speech markers such as pause fillers at the end of a completed speech unit or transitionally relevant place is very frequent in listening and pause fillers such as “um,” “urh,” or “eh” serve as helpers that solicit more time for the speaker to plan and in turn to furnish the listener with more time for processing the listening comprehension (Olynak 1990) .

Speakers use facilitation devices to ease speech production in real-life communication. Hence, effective listeners need to identify and be familiar with facilitation devices in free speech. The use of less complex structures is one of these devices. These are reductions of complete ‘underlying’ or ‘understood’ constructions. Many of the constructions are less than complete clauses and ellipses such as “me too,” “so am I,” “yes, I did,” and so on. It is necessary for a good listener to prepare for listening and to recover the full meaning of these constructions in real-life communication (Bygate 1987). Another device used in communication is the use of fixed and conversational phrases to facilitate speech production. Fluency in speech is related to formulaic language use. Formulaic language includes two main kinds: memorized sequences and lexicalized sentence stems. Memorized chunks of discourse include stock phrases such as “I’m sure you’re right but,” “you know,” “I see what you mean,” ‘kind of’ and so on. These memorized chunks of discourse are ready made phrases and they help the speaker to increase the speed and fluency. Further, routine utterances such as “you know,” “I mean,” and “well” may serve as pause fillers and they serve the function of filling unwanted pauses. In

order to be effective listeners, students need to understand the functions of such utterances of speakers (Pawley & Syder 1983).

Speakers use compensation devices such as redundancy in speech situations allowing the listener some processing time. Unlike in written text, listener cannot retrieve the spoken discourse during normal interaction. Redundancy helps to ease the comprehension of the speed of the natural speech allowing some processing time for the listener. There are three typical ways to build up redundancy which help to relieve the memory load of listeners. Repetition, reformulation and rephrasing are the ways through which the speakers use redundancy in speech situations in order to correct or improve what they have already said. Knowledge of this kind of redundancy is necessary to help understand the speech by the listener. Listeners should identify the elements of such redundancy devices and guess the meanings from the help of compensation devices.

### ***Pedagogical implications***

Until the importance of listening was recognized from the late 1960s, listening was perceived as a means of presenting new grammar. Recorded dialogues on tape provided examples of structures to be learned. This was the only type of listening practice most learners received. Practitioners recognized the importance of listening and began to allocate time for practicing the skill after 1960s. Three main stages of the listening lesson were developed at this time and they included; pre-listening, listening and post-listening stages. In the pre-listening stage, all important new vocabulary were taught while in the listening stage, extensive and intensive listening activities were done with general or detailed comprehension questions. The activities in the post-listening stage included analysis of the language in the text and listen and repeat the words after listening. The good listening task proposed by Field include; Pre-listening, Listening and Post-listening tasks and they provide valuable information to be considered in teaching listening (Field 2002:245).

In pre-listening stage, pre-teaching of vocabulary has now largely been changed. In real life, listeners can not expect the unknown words to be explained in advance. Instead, they have to learn to cope with situations where part of what is heard will not be familiar. However, limited 'critical' indispensable key words that may hinder any understanding of the text may be allowed. The pre-listening activities of usual lessons involve brainstorming vocabulary, reviewing areas of grammar, or the discussion on the topic of the text that consumes considerable time resulting in the shortening of time

available for 'listening' stage. Moreover, extended discussion of the topic can result in much of the content of listening passage being anticipated. Hence, he proposes two simple aims to be set in pre-listening stage: to provide sufficient context to match what would be available in real life; to create motivation by asking learners to speculate on what they will hear.

In the listening stage, though theorists argue that the playing the recording twice is unnatural as in real life listening, one gets only one listening. But the whole situation of listening to a cassette in a language classroom is, after all, artificial. Moreover, listening to a strange voice in foreign language requires a listener to adjust to the pitch, speed, and the quality of the voice. Hence, an initial attempt of listening allows more facilitation. Presetting comprehension questions ensure that the learners listen with a clear view. If questions are not set until after the passage has been heard, listeners listen in an unfocussed manner. The traditional form of comprehension questions needs to be changed providing tasks where learners 'do' something with the information they have extracted. Authentic materials have been another development of latest listening in place of scripted materials. They are indeed much closer to real life and need to be tuned to the level of the listeners. Further, authentic materials may possess conversational features such as hesitations, stuttering, false starts, and long loosely structured sentences. In real life, listening to a foreign language is a strategic activity. Nonnative listeners could recognize only part of what is heard and have to make guesses to comprehend fragmented pieces of text.

In the post-listening stage the examining functional forms of language is encouraged compared to those of examining grammar. The 'listen-and-repeat' phase has been dropped as it is similar to parroting. However, this development is argumentative as this phase helps learners to identify individual words within the stream of sounds. Also, post-listening may include inferring of meaning from contexts (ibid 2002:245).

Although Field has proposed a modified version of handling the listening skill, the basic stages of listening, i.e. Pre-listening, listening, and post listening remain unchanged in language teaching.

### ***Academic listening***

In the higher education sector, listening is the most frequently used skill in the classroom. Academic listening that leads to academic lecture comprehension is the 'accurate recall of what a lecturer says and accurate inferences about the lecture content and meaning' (Jeon 2007). Academic listening has distinctive features in contrast to conversational listening (Rost, 2002). In conversational



listening, the situation does not demand a high concentration and specialized skills related to listening. However, in academic listening, the listener has to identify the topics of a lecture and to follow topic development (Richards, 1983). Further, learners need to activate specialized background knowledge and to develop note-taking skills (Flowerdew, 1994) and the abilities to comprehend details and facts, to make inferences about the lecture content and relationship (Bejar, et. al., 2000).

Conaway has pointed out that academic listening plays an important role than reading skill. As a result, the scope of research on academic listening reported to be comprehensive. When students attend lectures conducted in second language, they may have some background knowledge of the subject area of the lecture to be followed, and be able to predict a little of the content of the lecture and they may still develop problems with regard to lecture comprehension (Conaway 1982).

Students need to master the art of decoding, comprehending, and taking notes in academic listening. It is insufficient to recognize only unit boundaries phonologically in order to decode what has been heard in a lecture conducted in second language. Students need to recognize the spoken discourse structure, styles of delivery, the accent and speed of speaking of the lecture, irregular pausing, false starts, hesitation, and stress and intonation patterns. Lecture comprehension becomes problematic as it does not facilitate interactive discourse. Further, students have to combine listening input with other sources such as black or white board displays, handouts, slides, overhead projector transparencies, videos etc. In note-taking, the ability to distinguish between important and less important points, recording of points without missing other points, taking- notes concisely and clearly, and the ability to decipher one's own notes at a later date to recall the essence are important (Jordan 2002).

### ***Strategies in listening***

Listening strategies are behaviours and thoughts that a listener engages in during listening that are intended to influence the listener's encoding process (Weinstein and Mayer 1986). Studies on listening strategy instruction suggest that students could be instructed in strategy use to enhance their performance on listening tasks. Since academic lecture comprehension in L2 setting is a challenging task for students, studies on listening strategy instruction have increased and the subsequent use of listening strategies by students have proved to be beneficial (Chen 2009; Goh 1997).

Research into listening strategies has based its theoretical framework on research of learning strategies and communication strategies (Bacon 1992; Vandergrift 1996). Both learning strategies and communication strategies are relevant to listening process in general and listening strategies in particular. Research into strategy use in second language learning has identified a great number of learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990) and communication strategies (Faerch & Kasper 1983). Further, researchers have pointed out that the distinctions among learning strategies, production strategies, and communication strategies are important in second language acquisition (ibid 1983). In the case of learning strategies, the focus has been on language acquisition while research on production and communication strategies, the focus has been on language use (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Learning strategies often concerns the characteristics of good L2 learners. However, communication strategies are mainly concerned with recovery of communication problems and collaborative interaction between interlocutors. Learning strategies help the learner to assimilate language knowledge and skills, while communication strategies aims to solve problems related to communication.

### ***Conclusion***

Listening had been a neglected language skill in ESL/EFL context for a quite a long time as teachers and researchers believed that learners would master L2 similar to L1 through repetition and imitation. Further, the concept of productive skills and receptive skills assumed to be another facet for this negligence. However, this premise changed since early 1960s and studies on listening and the importance the listening skill in research flourished in L2 context subsequently. The identification of purpose of listening and the processes of listening had a contributory influence on studies related to listening. The psychological perspectives particularly the identification of cognitive aspect of listening is a major breakthrough in the enhancement of research on listening.

The upsurge of English medium education and studies done in second languages in the world regions had a great influence on listening as lecturing has been the major medium of teaching in the classroom. There has been a growing demand for courses conducted in English in the higher education sector. This is due to the number of L2 English speakers or speakers of English as a foreign language attending universities in English-speaking countries and in non-English speaking countries continues to rise. This phenomenon is now seen in Europe in particular and in Asian and African regions in general. Hence, a new aspect of listening known as academic lecture comprehension became

important and academic listening skills became essential components in English language teaching programmes (Wilkinson 2005). The development of strategies in educational psychology, particularly in second language teaching has been a boon in present day research on listening as they enhanced and facilitated the listening comprehension skills. In the Sri Lankan context of English language teaching, listening has been given poor attention and it is almost late for us to recognize listening skill in our teaching programmes in order to identify the huge potentials of listening as a major skill that promotes English language learning of our students.

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