Active Listening Moving beyond Fill in the Blanks

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of listening has traditionally been very teacher centered with a top down approach. This approach however does not encourage listening fluency. To improve the quality of listening activities in the classroom teachers should make use of the technology available to them and vary the activities beyond the traditional fill in the blank or cloze activities.

Keywords: Active listening, fluency and second language acquisition

Listening is a surprisingly complex activity; it involves both physiological and psychological processes (Chan, 2009). First the individual must be able to perceive the sound produced. Second the sound waves are turned into electrical impulses which are transmitted through the brain. These impulses must then be categorized and decoded into language (Sakuma, 2000). When it comes to listening in a second language this process becomes even further complicated as the brain first has to recognize which language is being spoken and reduce the interference caused by the students first Language (Xu, 2012).

The stated goal of English language teaching is to produce students who are able to communicate in the target language. The effort to produce fluent speakers however is hindered by the lack of any teaching which encourages fluent listening. Fluent listening can be described as an ability to comprehend and manipulate the information being received in real time (Chen, 2008). A student should be able to listen to a native speaker and piece together the information being spoken without the reduction in speed and the reduction of noise associated with most "professional" listening activities (Morrow, 2006).

In the classroom too often teachers treat their students as listening objects (Mohammad, 2012). The teacher imparts the information and the student absorbs the information in a manner similar to a sponge. In no other classroom activity is this as readily apparent as in the EFL listening classroom. Often listening classes run as follows the teacher may pre-teach some vocabulary and then presses play on the CD player while the students fill in the blanks. The information is supposed to be absorbed by the students and then comprehension is displayed by completing an activity.

The activities that are most commonly associated with listening classes have easy outs built into them. The traditional cloze or gap fill activity can be completed with very little understanding of the text. Reading comprehension clues often make the activity pointless or turn it into a reading test rather than accurately assessing the students listening ability. The student can in many cases listen selectively for the word immediately before the gap focus on the missing element. When the student adopts this strategy the activity becomes a test of student hearing and spelling not their ability to listen and comprehend. Even the more understanding based activities of true or false can often be accomplished by keyword listening where a student selects a keyword and listens for it.
This style of listening class is normally defended on the grounds that this is how the students will be

tested so they need practice. Sadly this is a circular argument and is advocating that we teach to a test rather than teaching to improve the understanding of our students (Halone, 2001).

After considering all of this it is easy to conclude that the traditional listening class has not changed since the time of the audio lingual method. Even though the technology available to teachers has dramatically improved and the understanding of how students acquire language has likewise improved (White, 2011).

When the Audio –Lingual method was first developed access to recording technologies was expensive and replay facilities were limited. Often a school would only have one or maybe two dedicated language labs. However since the advent of the mp3 in the early 1990's the cost of recording and setting up a portable language lab has fallen dramatically. With many students having access to their own technology it is often possible to setup an ad hoc facility at no cost. Teachers need to be aware and use free software like Audacity to produce listening exercises that can be tailored to the specific classes needs (Choi, 2008).

Personal MP3 players also open up options to place the students in charge of their own listening. The students listen to the material as much as they feel they need to accomplish the goal and the teacher does not have to run a teacher centered classroom. The use of personal mp3s also allows students to control the volume at which they are listening, the place where they pause and when they repeat the listening. This more accurately simulates what happens in a conversation where a listener can interact with a speaker, ask them to repeat themselves, to speak louder or even ask them to pause while the listener catches up with what has been said. This level of student control also changes a listening test from being a memory test to being more about processing the information as its being presented to them.

The other way that listening classes can be improved is by using a variety of tasks to engage the listener cognitively with the listening. When a student is being asked to produce something based on the listening that they are doing they are more likely to be attentive and retain the language used (Morrow, 2006).

One option is for the teacher to create an information gap listening where the information needed to complete a task is separated between two or three separate mp3s. Students would listen to one mp3 and then have to share what they learned to complete the task as a group. This style of activity would encourage students to engage with both the listening and their peers in a communicative task increasing the value of the class (Fallahkhair, 2007).

Another is to use graphic organizers like mind maps to allow a student to demonstrate their comprehension of the conversation that they are listening too. A mind map requires a student to move from general understanding of the listening down to listening for specific details. This pattern of listening emphasis understanding over keyword listening (Burrows, Guthrie, Peterson, & Rakow-Larson, 1999).

If the goal of a listening class is too improve student comprehension and ability to use the language the teaching methodology must reflect this goal. With the introduction more spoken assessment into the Korean school system the drive to have students able to understand and use the English language is higher than ever. The traditional approach to listening classes encourages students to develop specific

tactics best suited to passing exams. The traditional class also ignores the technology that is ubiquitous in Korean society and fails to leverage it into positive learning outcomes. Finally the traditional listening class does not create tasks which require high levels of student involvement to complete.

To produce fluent speakers we must first produce fluent listeners who can engage with the listening on a level beyond fill in the blanks.

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About the Presenter
Peadar Callaghan graduated from the University of Dundee with an MA in History. He went on to study at the University of Limerick graduating with an Ma in ELT. He has been working in Korea since 2005. He has taught at Kyungpook National University and Daegu University as well as working as an author for Education Designers. He is also very active with KOYESOL serving as the 1st VP. His research interests are focused on "Principled Pragmatism" and he has given presentations on topics ranging from Corpus linguistics through to the use of Comicbooks in SLA. The presentation outlined in this paper will focus on how to apply active listening techniques to a classroom environment.