

# THE DIMENSIONS OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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## *Introduction*

**T**here are four skills in a language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening and reading are receptive and speaking and writing are productive. That is, in the receptive skills the information is received and in the productive skills the information is produced. In other words, the listener and the reader select, sample, accumulate, interpret, and summarize the input, whereas the speaker and the writer select, integrate, assimilate, compose and verbally and overtly manifest the output. At the same time, listening and speaking are spoken and reading and writing are written. Thus, listening and speaking pertain to the aural-oral mode, while reading and writing pertain to the visual mode. In addition to this, listening and reading require analysis, in which the received information is analyzed and then processed and registered, but speaking and writing require synthesis, in which the information is formulated and then conveyed to the listener or the reader. On the whole, listening and reading entail decoding and speaking and writing entail encoding processes.

Goodman (1970) illustrates the encoding - decoding processes in the following model:

Goodman (1970) and Anderson and Lynch, (1989) believe that listening and speaking and, as a result, decoding and encoding are totally interdependent. The decoding processes are entirely based upon the encoding processes and the decoder obtains his input from the encoder. The encoder constructs his message and produces his message and the decoder samples the aural - oral code and cracks the code into linguistic elements and ultimately comprehends the forthcoming information.

Fong (1982) defines decoding as breaking the stream of sounds into phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactic units and relating them to their corresponding semantic features and consequently leading to the understanding of the message (P.90). Mackey (1965), on the other hand, defines encoding as selecting the raw material of the message, choosing the syntactic structures, plugging in the lexical items, adding the inflectional bound morphemes, synthesizing the sequence of the utterance, grouping the sounds through the application of the phonological rules, and finally uttering the sounds.

Carton (1976), however, believes that the message cannot be truly comprehended unless it is "demessaged". Demessaging refers to the holistic comprehension of the message with all its suprasentential, discorsal, and pragmatic dimensions. Anderson (1985) classifies three distinct processes in listening comprehension: perceptual processing, parsing and utilization. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define perceptual processing as focusing attention on the construction of meaningful mental representations of the message (Anderson, 1985; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). In parsing, the message is segmented into propositions and concatenations (Anderson, 1985), while deriving meaning from them. Finally, utilization refers to relating mental representations of the meaning to the declarative knowledge or the abstract propositions stored in the long-term memory (Anderson, 1985; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

While "perceptual processes", "parsing", "utilization", and, above all, "demessaging" are the central processes of extracting meaning from the message in listening and reading, "enmessaging" is the most essential process of composing the message with all its discursual entities. "Enmessaging" is of paramount importance in speaking and writing. Through enmessaging the speakers and writers can have genuine and authentic communication with their listeners and readers. (FIGURE TWO)

In teaching the four skills of language, different theories and approaches are being employed. Widdowson (1978) suggests an integrated approach which "brings linguistic skills and communicative abilities into close association with each other." (P.144) However, conventional and traditional practices tend to move towards the segregation rather than the integration of the language skills. Widdowson believes that all the four skills should be taught together and simultaneously; whereas other specialists advocate the disintegrated approach in which the skills are taught separately. Naturally, in this approach, listening should be taught first and then speaking should follow it. After the students have reached a level of competency in the receptive skills, they should be introduced to the printed page for reading and writing.

Whatever the approach is going to be, the components of the skills should be considered first. Listening and speaking call for the mastery of phonology, lexicon, syntax, morphology, semantics, and discourse, and reading and writing require an additional mastery of graphology.

### *Listening Comprehension*

Listening comprehension is one of the most essential skills in a foreign language teaching program. However, this skill has been severely neglected. There has been very little emphasis on this skill and, in fact, in the majority of the FL programs, it is a forgotten skill. The reason behind this negligence may be that very few teachers of foreign languages are capable of reaching the goal of listening comprehension, which is to enable the students to understand the natural language of the natives at a normal rate. Clearly, this skill must be taught by native teachers or, if not natives, near-native teachers who have

mastery over the oral aspect of the foreign language. Since such teachers are not available in most of the schools, listening comprehension is destined to be banned.

It should be borne in mind that listening comprehension is the basis of speaking and without this skill, oral language will never be developed. Therefore, there should be an attempt to teach listening comprehension from the outset. The students should be exposed to the foreign language to establish a repertoire for later production.

In order to discuss the teaching of listening comprehension, the following concepts should be clarified:

- 1) listening comprehension as a communicative skill to show that listening comprehension is an important element of communication which is totally based on speaking;
- 2) the psycholinguistic aspects of listening comprehension to understand the linguistic as well as the psychological or cognitive processes of listening comprehension;
- 3) and the stages and components of listening comprehension.

Each category will be elaborated in detail.

### ***Listening Comprehension as a Communicative Skill***

Listening comprehension is a receptive oral skill which totally depends upon the productive skill of speaking. Listening comprehension is a purposive, selective act of communication which cannot operate in vacuum. Listening is a communicative skill which is one element of a two-way process of oral communication. Listening comprehension should be discussed in a listening - speaking paradigm.

In any oral communication act, there are three important components: the speaker who is the sender or the encoder of the message, the listener who receives the message, and the message or the code which is the utterance produced to convey meaning to the listener. Therefore, the listener does not perform in isolation and depends upon the speaker.

At the same time, listening does not automatically lead to communication.

Communication only takes place when the listener and the speaker have the same linguistic, pragmatic, schematic competence.

Schematic competence relates to what "Bartlett" (1932) called "schema" and what Schank and Abelson (1977) called script. Schema is defined "as a mental structure, consisting of relevant individual knowledge, memory, and experience, which allows to incorporate what we learn into what we know." (Anderson and Lynch, 1989). Script refers to "a set of knowledge of probable sequences of events in familiar situations." (Anderson and Lynch, 1989)

The listener develops his competence based upon the speaker's performance. The listener starts as a competence builder. After the message is received, decoded and demessage, he would become a speaker and a message composer or producer. He, then, builds on the previously-acquired competence and tries to manifest his competence verbally. Of course, competence is revealed through performance. Performance is affected by outside factors such as physical, physiological, psychological, neurological, and environmental factors, whereas competence is only influenced by the temporal factor. Time lapse affects competence.

The listener and speaker can have successful communication when the listener and speaker share similar competence. They must have common competence. Competence refers to (1) linguistic competence, which encompasses (a) phonology, (b) lexicon, (c) morphology, (d) syntax, and (e) semantics; (2) communicative competence, which includes (a) linguistic competence and (b) discoursal competence, which the listener and speaker share similar background knowledge (factual and sociocultural), contextual knowledge (textual and cotextual knowledge), and systemic knowledge (phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic) (Anderson and Lynch, 1989).

The listener can only demessage the input received when he has the same or similar schematic competence of that of the speaker. In other case, he would only decode the message and would lose a variety of nuances of meaning and the discoursal features of the heard message.

Widdowson (1978) makes a distinction between listening and hearing in relation to "usage" and "use". He refers to hearing "as the recognition of the

signification of sentences." (P. 60) He says in hearing, the listener recognizes that the stream of sounds identified by the ear pertain to the phonological and grammatical system of the language. Thus, hearing encompasses usage, whereas listening relates to the use of the language, in which the listener recognizes the communicative and schematic functions of the sentences he hears. This would require the understanding of the use of a specific utterance in a context.

**Hearing, then,... is the activity of recognizing that signals conveyed through the aural medium constitute sentences which have a certain signification. Listening is the activity of recognizing what function sentences have in an interaction, what communicative value they' take on as instances of use.**  
(Widdowson, 1978, p. 60)

On the other hand, speaking is also dependent upon listening. Speaking, likewise, has two different aspects of use and usage. Speaking as an instance of usage refers to the employment of the vocal organs and the manifestation of the act of conceptualization and it is naturally a productive skill. However, talking and saying refer to the use of language which take place in a face to-face communication setting. This way, the speaker can adjust his message to the gestures, facial expressions, body movements and other paralinguistic and discoursal phenomena. All these non-verbal elements of communication are received through the visual media.

As mentioned by Widdowson (1978), talking and saying encompass both reciprocal activities. Listening requires hearing and saying requires speaking, and the reverse order is not true. One can hear things without listening and one can speak a sentence without saying anything. Therefore, listening is the receptive counterpart of saying and talking involves both listening and saying and is, thus, both a productive and a receptive skill which uses both the aural and the visual modes.

### ***The Psycholinguistic Aspects of Listening Comprehension***

Listening comprehension is a decoding activity which demands highly complex mental operations. Decoding involves complicated psycholinguistic processing which calls for the perception of a systematic message from the

received sounds. However, the listener or the decoder undergoes a series of psycholinguistic processes in order to convert the received aural signals into the perceived code. These psycholinguistic processes are briefly discussed below.

Wilga Rivers (1972) categorizes three distinct linguistic and psychological factors in speech perception such as (1) sensing which is the stage of the reception of the roughly identified and differentiated rapid impressions of the sound; (2) identifying which is the identification of linguistic elements of the auditory code; and finally (3) rehearsing and recoding which is the recapitulation of information in the cognitive system and relating it to the previously-heard material and readapting the already-interpreted material to reformulate a revised or reviewed message. River's psycholinguistic classification of speech perception deals with the general processes, whereas here we want to discuss the detailed aspects of listening comprehension.

It must be mentioned that the listener first hears the sounds and the sounds are only noise and jibberish to him. After his ears are trained, he will be able to apply the phonological rules to grasp the lexical items and morphological endings, and to employ the syntactic rules in order to associate meanings to the words in context. Therefore, the listener is first exposed to the entire message; then, he goes through the following psycholinguistic processes:

#### 1. Reception

The listener first receives the message through the suprasegmental features such as terminal juncture, pitch and stress; then, he identifies the segmental and lexical features.

#### 2. Recognition

The listener then recognizes some words which relate to the stored information in the short-term memory.

#### 3. Selection

The listener selects some of these recognized words and samples them in meaningful chunks.

#### 4. Perception



The listener perceives the message and formulates his initial hypothesis which he later on confirms or rejects.

5. Retention

The listener stores the information in the right compartment of the brain.

6. Cognition

The perceived auditory information is sent to the brain for verification. If the information is confirmed, the listener has conceptualized the message. If the information is rejected, the listener has to ask the speaker for clarification of his code for better understanding. This is, of course, based upon the information in the cognitive structure of the listener.

7. Conception

At this stage, the listener has "chunked" the right information for the brain to form the concept.

8. Schematization

The listener has formulated the schema and the script.

9. Comprehension

The listener has "linguisticized" and, as a result, conceptualized the message and naturally has derived the meaning of the auditory information.

As the above - mentioned steps indicate, listening comprehension is an analytic process. The ears select the necessary auditory information and send it to the brain. The information is processed in either a "serial bottom - up order," which formulates a message based on the lowest level units, which are phonemes, or a "top - down order," which proceeds from the concept to the string of words and phonemes. (Anderson and Lynch, 1989)

The brain refers to the files stored in the long - term memory or inter - memory and relates the new stock of information to the sensory repertoire. The image of the auditory symbols is ingrained in the sensory store, which acts as a mediator for retention. Selection must necessarily accompany retention to make the listener perceive the information. Perception is a meaningful process which might not lead to total comprehension. It is the foundation of understanding. It is the construction of the message which



might have to be reconstructed. It is what Rivers calls reviewing or recoding. Nonetheless, the listener formulates and reformulates the message based on his cognitive network, which encompasses his communicative competence. The listener "chunks" this information in meaningful units and sends them to the brain to be registered. After the brain has processed the information, the listener has conceptualized and, as a result, decoded, demessaged and comprehended.

### ***Stages in Listening Comprehension***

Listening comprehension requires proceeding through different stages. Wilga Rivers (1984) classifies the following stages in listening comprehension:

1. Recognition and perception of the phonemes, intonation, lexical items, syntactic units with their interrelationships;
2. Selection of the linguistic elements which contain the essence of the message.

According to Chastain (1988) there are four different stages involved in listening comprehension:

1. Sound discrimination which aims at enabling the students to distinguish the sounds from the sounds of the mother tongue.
2. Perception of the message which aims at getting the students to listen and concentrate on what is being said in order to register it on their consciousness.
3. Auditory memory which aims at developing the students' memory span in order to enable them to keep the hard material.
4. Comprehension which aims at enabling the students to understand the linguistic and discorsal levels of the meaning of the message.

Therefore, the listener is exposed to a stream of sounds and he perceives the intonational patterns of speech and recognizes some of the words and structures. As a result, he tries to grasp the meanings of these phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic items and understand the nuances of the target sounds as distinctive units of the target language, (2) to differentiate between

the sounds of Farsi and those of the foreign language (English), (3) to combine the individual sounds into the smallest meaningful units of language called morphemes and ultimately into syntactic and semantic "chunks," (4) to identify the intonation of the utterances and comprehend their semantic and discursal implications, and finally (5) to perceive assimilation and sandhi - variation and the meaningful nuances of natural utterances. In order to achieve this goal and develop competence in the students, we should teach in the following procedure:

1. Phonology
  - a. Segmentals
  - b. Suprasegmentals
2. Lexis - morphology
  - a. Words
  - b. Affixation
3. Syntax
  - a. Word order
  - b. Inter - sentential and intrasentential relationships
4. Semantics
  - a. Linguistic meaning
  - b. Implicit meaning
  - c. Implicative meaning
5. Pragmatics
  - a. Context
  - b. Culture
  - c. Pragmatic features
  - d. Idioms, colloquial and slang expressions, false starts, fillers, etc.
6. Discourse
  - a. Verbal
  - b. Non - verbal

(Based on Celce - Murcia; 1979, Rivers, 1984; Jakobovits, 1970)

Therefore, it is quite obvious that listening has to lead to comprehension and in order for comprehension to accompany listening, we have to proceed

from sounds in context and move on to words and word meanings in utterances, dialogues, and any other discursal units. The ultimate goal should be to enable the students to understand natural speech at normal speed and grasp the implications and connotations behind words, sentences, idioms, and expressions.

As it was mentioned before, linguistic competence is necessary but not sufficient. The students should be able to comprehend the verbal and non-verbal aspects of the language in order to demessage the heard material.

Listening comprehension is based on not only auditory or aural but also on visual information. The listener should listen to the utterances as well as to observe the gestures, body movements, signs and kinesthetic elements which accompany the speaker's discourse in order to comprehend the meaning of the message.

Contrary to what Chomsky (1965) says, language is not "self - contained." Brown (1987) believes that language is not "a sentence - level phenomenon." (P. 205) As a result , in listening comprehension or and other language skill, teaching must be contextualized. That is, language should be taught from the sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspectives. Listening comprehension exercises and activities should be functionally based. These exercises would be more meaningful, realistic, and cognitively - oriented and would lead to a more global understanding.

Rivers (1984) aims at developing linguistic and communicative abilities of the students, whereas we want them to grasp the functional and contextualized meanings of the stretches of discourse. The students should understand utterances in different situations. The same utterance might have different situations, and in order to show the right reaction to the same utterance in different contexts, the students should have had contextualized listening comprehension exercises. For example, if a speaker says, "It is too hot" Inside a room, the listener's reaction should be "to open the door." However, if the speaker says, "It is too hot. "outside in an open air context, the listener should say, "Take off your coat." But what if the speaker has only a light dress on? In such a context, the listener should respond, "Yes, let's go

inside, it is cooler there." or "Yes, let's go and get something cold to drink." Of course, this response is based on a presupposed friendly relationship which has its own socio-cultural taboos and limitations.

Therefore, teaching listening comprehension should focus on contextualized exercises and tasks which call for meaningful practice, meaningful application and deep and thorough understanding of the varieties of discourse. The listeners should be able to react and respond in the right way in the different situations and with the different people.

Brumfit (1984) suggests an integrated program for the teaching of the different skills. The following Table shows the practical techniques for teaching listening comprehension in a listening - speaking paradigm.

#### ***BRUMFITS' TABLE OF PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING LISTENING AND SPEAKING SKILLS***

Brumfit proposes contextualized listening comprehension based on drills, practices, games, which would develop fluency and communicative abilities. In general, the teaching of contextualized comprehension should be taught in conjunction with speaking, since they are the prerequisites of each other and call for reciprocity and negotiation. In a communicative program, listening comprehension should be given priority.

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