

## THE ROLE OF ACTIVE LISTENING IN THE ACQUISITION OF SECOND LANGUAGES

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### ABSTRACT

*THE ACQUISITION OF FOREIGN / SECOND LANGUAGES IS A COMPLEX PROCESS AND INVOLVES A GREAT DEAL OF FACTORS, WHICH BOTH EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS SHOULD TAKE INTO ACCOUNT. NOT ONLY THE INFORMATION (WHAT WE TEACH) AND THE TEACHING METHODS (HOW WE TEACH) COUNT, BUT ALSO OTHER ASPECTS, SUCH AS THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT. MORE PRECISELY, ALONG WITH THE CONTENTS AND SKILLS THAT ONE SHOULD ACQUIRE IN ORDER TO BE AN EFFICIENT L2 USER, TEACHER'S ATTITUDE PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THIS PROCESS. A SUPPORTIVE AND POSITIVE TEACHER, THE STRESS-FREE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT COULD EASE THE ACQUISITION OF L2 AND INCREASE STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION AND LINGUISTIC SKILLS. THE ACTIVE LISTENING COULD BE EFFICIENT IN CLASS IN MANY WAYS: ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS, SOLVING PROBLEMS, PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH CONFIDENCE, DEVELOPING A WIDE RANGE OF SKILLS, ERROR CORRECTION, ASSESSMENT, FEEDBACK.*

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**KEY WORDS:** ACTIVE LISTENING, TEACHING, LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, SPEAKING ACTIVITIES

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The complex process of teaching and learning involves a wide range of psychological, pedagogical and personal factors, which should be taken into account from both teacher's and student's point of view. The present paper discusses the acquisition of foreign / second languages from the angle of teacher's attitude during classes, an essential aspect when dealing with students of all ages and levels. More precisely, we will highlight the importance of active listening, as a communication technique, in the teaching / learning process: class activities, error correction, evaluation and feedback. The idea developed in the present article came after reading *Practical techniques for language teaching*, where it was briefly expressed the importance of active listening in the teaching process. This paper is mainly based on our teaching experience and direct empirical

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observations during classes and will give special attention to groups of beginners or elementary students.

Our paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a definition of the term *active listening* and presents some of its advantages. Section 3 refers to the characteristics of verbal and nonverbal communication. The main parts of the present paper are sections 4, 5 and 6, that discuss how active listening can be effectively applied in the field of language learning and teaching. In the final section, we will present the conclusions of the analysis.

## **2. ACTIVE LISTENING - DEFINITION AND ADVANTAGES**

Generally, listening is an active process that requires conscious efforts, concentration and interest. So it implies not only hearing, but also understanding and involvement. Moreover, active listening is a communication technique, used in the field of relationships and problem solving. It is the ability of paraphrasing information and supposes not interrupting the speaker and not formulating responses or comments until the speaker is done.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, active listening can help solving problems and seeing other aspects of a given situation. It builds relations by diffusing emotional situations at work, family or in any other group.

As modern theories claim, teachers do not merely play the role of an information container or provider. They should also be a behaviour model, give confidence and support their students. Therefore we consider that active listening used in class could improve these apparently 'external' aspects, such as the learning environment, building confidence and relations, and the overall language acquisition, as we will explain in the following parts of our paper.

## **3. VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION. ACTS OF SPEECH**

As it is widely known, human communication is both verbal and nonverbal. We do not communicate only by words and phrases. The acts of speech also include gestures and intonation, for instance, which can express more than a simple phrase. Nonverbal elements play an important role in decrypting speaker's intentions, attitude, mood and even the meaning of a word or phrase. The pragmatic context is also fundamental in communication and transmitting the message.

Therefore, teachers should react positively, having the adequate attitude, gestures and intonation, especially during speaking activities. By adopting this attitude, teachers encourage and motivate students to talk and provide them with confidence. They can either transmit indifference or an aggressive attitude or interest.

Moreover, apart from the linguistic input, teachers should provide non-linguistic elements, as well, in order to develop students' communicative skills. Thus nonverbal communication can contribute to the acquisition of both intercultural competence and pragmatic uses of languages. They will know *what* to say in a particular situation, *how* to say it or react, what to avoid etc. A wide range of phrases and nonverbal elements are specific to a particular community of speakers, who use them in certain situations, and a foreign language learner must understand and use them properly.

Beyond grammar and the semantic content of language, we have to take into consideration the pragmatic functions of language and the general communicative competence<sup>3</sup>. A great role in

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/kdbourque/active-listening-presentation-36893005>.

<sup>3</sup> We are referring here to interacting with others in conversations, public presentations etc., that imply not only linguistic competence, but also social skills and personal characteristics.

communication is played by the situation and the purpose of communication, such as introducing, inviting, accepting or refusing, agreeing or disagreeing, suggesting and advising, giving directions, making a request, a complaint, apologising etc. More precisely, the appropriateness in interpersonal relations develops the communicative competence, which is based on a set of social norms and values that we have to follow in our everyday interaction. Pratima Dave Shastri says that one cannot address their teacher the way they addresses a friend or a family member: “this leads to the concept of correctness and appropriateness. A grammatically correct sentence can be inappropriate in a particular context. For example, ‘hey, coming for the film!’ is acceptable between friends, but is unacceptable if a subordinate uses it for his boss.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the same sentence can have a different meaning according to the communicative (pragmatic) context, speaker’s intention, intonation, gestures, position of the body etc. All communication situations are based on the so called functions of language or pragmatic uses of language. Each function can be performed in different ways and learners, therefore, should acquire these ways and their appropriateness in a formal, semiformal or informal situation.

#### **4. THE RELATION BETWEEN ACTIVE LISTENING AND SPEAKING**

Reading, listening, writing and speaking are the four basic skills in the acquisition of foreign languages. Speaking is a productive competence that consists of both producing oral messages (e.g. presentations, monologues etc.) and interacting with other language users (in conversations, for instance). Nevertheless, it could be considered one of the most difficult skills to acquire, as it implies a complex cognitive activity and a wide range of other information and skills. In order to be an efficient speaker, apart from language content (lexis and grammar), one needs to cover other areas too, such as general knowledge, life experience, communicative and social skills (emotional intelligence), body language, intonation, gestures, language functions and pragmatic uses. So there are many different factors involved in the act of speaking or language learning. For example, shy learners, in spite of their solid grammar and vocabulary knowledge, might encounter some difficulties when speaking in public or in a foreign language. That is why teacher should have positive reactions and encourage communication in order to develop student’s self-esteem. Sometimes, beginners or elementary students find speaking activities the most difficult as they have to use a great deal of linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Moreover, intonation, gestures and body language, that accompany and give consistence to our oral presentations and speaking acts, emphasise ideas and make our discourse more persuading.

Teachers should give some further consideration to speaking skills in language classes, by providing students with more time for speaking activities in order to express their opinions and interact with others. Speaking activities – either guided exercises or free conversation – should play an important part in a course. Beginners, but not only, should overpass their fear or shyness when speaking. Teachers’ behaviour and attitude are fundamental in initiating and guiding different speaking activities, such as free conversation, expressing opinions, dialogues, role playing etc.

More precisely, when teaching foreign languages, it is essential to have a positive attitude to what students say. Teachers should express their interest in the conversation with their students

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<sup>4</sup> Pratima Dave Shastri, *Communicative Approach to the Teaching of English as a Second Language*, Himalaya Publishing House.

and motivate their students to continue the dialogue. All teacher's reactions must show interest in the topic and conversation.

(Free) conversation must exploit real events and students' opinions about a particular topic. Guided speaking activities might have, in a certain degree, an expected output depending on the input, topic and students' level. Students' imagination and experience play an important part in speaking, especially when students have a higher language level. On the other hand, at lower levels (A1-A2), students give expected answers and tend to use only a reduced set of grammar contents and lexical units that belong to their active grammar and vocabulary resources. Elementary students, for instance, talk about things they learned (house, family, job, daily routines etc.) and they mostly 'tell lies'. They do not say what they *really do* or they *would like to say*, but what they *are able to say*. Part of exploiting real events involves reacting naturally to what students say, both in exercises and in free conversation. Look at the following situation, provided by Lewis and Hill in their *Practical techniques: For language teaching*<sup>5</sup>:

*T: So, have you seen "The Sound of Music"?*

*S1: Yes, but only on television.*

*T: And what about you?*

*S2: No, I don't like musicals.*

*T: Oh, don't you? Have you seen it, S3?*

*S3: Yes I have — 18 times.*

*T: Yes, and what about you, S4?*

Now, let us analyse teacher's reactions and comments. The authors cited emphasise that the teacher's response to S2 is appropriate, as "it is natural and gives the students a chance to notice a typical feature of active listening (*Oh, don't you?*)". By this question, he / she shows interest and involvement. On the other hand, the teacher's reaction to S3 is a disaster for two main reasons. Firstly, the teacher's reaction seems to be quite automatic and such a reaction is possible if he / she was not listening. Realising that you are not listening has a strong demotivating effect on students. Secondly, the teacher missed a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate in a natural context the intonation appropriate to expressing surprise: *18 times! What on earth for?*. Lewis and Hill conclude that "if you are surprised, shocked, curious, doubtful, etc. make sure you show it in your general reaction, in what you say, and in how you say it. Encourage other students to show their reactions too. Such reacting develops an important language skill — the active role of the listener in a conversation — and makes both the language and your lessons more alive for students."<sup>6</sup> In such situations, active listening creates the impression of real life conversation by the interlocutor's involvement.

## **5. TEACHER'S ATTITUDE, TEACHING ACTIVITIES, CLASS MANAGEMENT**

Other aspects concerning class organisation could be affected by teacher's attitude: the selection of teaching activities / materials, the class management and the general atmosphere during classes. Among the factors one should take into consideration is the class environment: the

<sup>5</sup> Michael Lewis, Jimmy Hill, *Practical techniques: For language teaching*, (Hove: Language Teaching Publications, 1992), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Lewis, Jimmy Hill, *Practical techniques: For language teaching...*, 13

classroom as a physical space with all its elements (furniture, light, board, equipment, plants), the group of students and their particularities (age, interests, habits, level etc.), materials, activities, teacher's and students' attitude. All these contribute to a more or less efficient (language) class.

The teacher is in charge with designing his / her class, according to all the elements mentioned above. Thus teachers adapt materials, contents and activities to the group. He / she should encourage and promote values such as cooperation, tolerance, confidence, self-esteem, group work and progress and create a relaxing, stress-free atmosphere. Once again active listening plays a great part in building relations and such an atmosphere based on confidence, respect and security<sup>7</sup>. In class and during conversations or other activities that simulate real life situations, teacher's and other students' reactions are very important. Thus, patience, respect and involvement are required during classes.

Moreover, in the relations between the teacher and his / her students or between students, there are many problems that might appear, but conflicts or discipline problems can also be solved by appealing to active listening.

## **6. CORRECTING ERRORS, ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK**

Finally, we will discuss here other significant aspects in the interaction teacher-student: correcting errors during class activities, final or periodical assessment and, last but not least, providing feedback. No activity, the teaching-learning process included, should lack of (periodic and / or final) evaluation and feedback from both sides, in order to improve it. Teacher's attitude is essential in these three aspects and active listening could be of great help, as corrections, evaluation and feedback should not be a stressful part of a course.

As *The Common European Framework of Languages* suggests, "all errors should be noted and corrected at a time when doing so does not interfere with communication"<sup>8</sup>. More precisely, teachers must not interfere in students' conversation or presentation each time they commit errors, because this would impede communication and would make students lose their flow of ideas and confidence. For instance, the corrective feedback, if we want it efficient, must be given at the end of the oral production and should present systematically the errors and explain them.

We have to consider the three aspects mentioned above as a constructive way of improving the language acquisition. Thus, teachers should assert their opinions respectfully and respond appropriately, not aggressively. As in real life we treat the others like we would want to be treated, the same should happen in class. Otherwise, the overall class atmosphere could become stressful, less friendly and less efficient.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS**

The main purpose of our paper was to present another significant element of teaching and learning foreign languages, namely the teacher's attitude towards his / her students, with respect to the development of an essential skill: speaking competence.

A language teacher should cover a wide range of aspects in class, in order to help his / her students to develop not only their grammar and vocabulary knowledge, but also their (general)

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<sup>7</sup> Sabina Manes (coord.): *83 de jocuri psihologice pentru animarea grupurilor*, trad. rom., (Iasi: Polirom, 2008), 12-18.

<sup>8</sup> *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, 155

communicative and interaction skills. Active listening could play an essential part in speaking activities. Teachers should take part in the conversation, by expressing involvement and interest in the topic. This creates a relaxing learning environment and gives the impression of real life communication. Students concentrate on their speaking task, they become more confident and their self-esteem is increased.

At least at elementary levels, the emphasis should lay on the development of students' speaking skills and not on the correctness of their performance. A teacher who is not involved, who has a neuter tone, who is not interested in the conversation itself, could discourage the speaker. Moreover, teachers should avoid correcting their students over and over again while speaking, because they could inhibit them and stop their flow of ideas.

To conclude, among the activities in which active listening can prove its efficiency, we can mention the process of teaching/learning foreign languages. The class is a social environment, a group with different members that establish relations. The teaching environment should not be stressful, in order to be efficient, and active listening can help in a great deal of situations: building relations (teacher-students or student-student), problem solving, class management, stress control, corrections, assessment, feedback. The control of these aspects - which characterise every group or are class-specific - can increase the language acquisition (especially, the speaking competence) and confidence.

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