

Developing an original listening lesson for primary school learners: a process-oriented teaching approach

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Abstract

In foreign language learning the listening skill has proved to be extremely essential for carrying out coherent and effective oral communication with other people. Listening is a key skill and is better performed if there is an integration of all four skills and, especially, speaking. The present teaching proposal attempts to develop an original listening lesson focusing on the process of listening on the basis of modern pedagogical theories and methods. To this end, the paper discusses the proposal's rationale with reference to the listening input, class profile and lesson preparation as well as the procedure and listening tasks' efficiency providing a post-lesson evaluation of the teaching outcomes as well. Given that listening is the most underestimated skill in the Greek school context, this paper aims to encourage foreign language teachers to be independent course designers in order to assist their learners develop their listening competence overcoming listening comprehension problems.

Key-words: listening input, skills integration, process, lesson planning, tasks

Introduction

The approach to listening instruction has evolved expanding 'from a focus on the product of listening (*listening to learn*) to include a focus on the process (*learning to listen*)' as quoted by Vandergrift (2004, pp.3). Research has also shown that foreign language learners (Ls) should be motivated by the specific listening input to which they are exposed and the relevant tasks or activities they have to carry out, while at the same time the integration of listening with other skills is considered to be of paramount importance (Dunkel, 1991; Hamouda, 2013; Oxford, 1993; Rost, 2011).

Listening input should be relevant to Ls' cognitive and linguistic competence, age and interests (Tzotzou, 2014a). The spoken discourse used as listening input should have all the characteristics of authentic and genuine speech to be linguistically efficient and pedagogically motivating (Dey, 2014; Ghaderpanahi, 2012). It is also essential to create purposeful listening tasks which respond to the input provided and Ls' proficiency following an efficient and well-structured sequence of actions (Porter & Roberts, 1981; Richards, 1983).

In light of the above, the present teaching proposal adopts a *process-oriented* approach to teaching listening. It includes listening tasks which trigger both *top-down* and *bottom-up* processes through an interactive and interpretative process where Ls

use both their prior content schemata and linguistic knowledge to understand messages (Vandergrift, 2002). More specifically, there are listening tasks for gist which involve primarily top-down processing as well as listening tasks for specific information which involve primarily bottom-up processing to comprehend all the necessary details. According to Vandergrift (2002), listening is a process of matching speech with what Ls already know about the topic. To this end, Ls are provided with clues about the context of the listening text, thus facilitating the process considerably because they can activate prior knowledge and make predictions essential to prepare for listening comprehension (Byrnes, 1984).

Last but not least, in teaching listening the sequencing process of the various tasks is very important (Richards, 1983). With this in mind, as far as the present original listening lesson is concerned, the sequence of actions follows the model of pre-/while-/post framework in an attempt to integrate the other skills as well. The following sections discuss in detail the rationale as regards lesson planning, the procedure as well as the post-lesson evaluation of the teaching outcomes.

Rationale-Lesson Planning

Listening Input and Lesson Preparation

The *semi-authentic* listening input the teacher prepared and taught in the 5th grade is a narrative and its topic is ‘London Sightseeing’. It is a teacher-produced and semi-scripted oral discourse based on teacher’s notes (Dirven & Oakeshott-Taylor, 1985). Its content is transactional, it follows both the ‘top-down’ and the ‘bottom-up’ processes as Ls should listen for specific details (names of sights/buildings and relevant information) based on their linguistic and lexical knowledge; and it has got features of genuine spoken language (e.g. exclamatory sentences, real-life expressions). Its form is descriptive / narrative and the recording is just satisfactory as it is not professionally produced (the teacher-produced listening input was recorded using Audacity – an ‘easy-to-use’ audio editor and recorder. The original input is available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/27yyo65ywm10xtv/London-sos.mp3?dl=0>).

To prepare the lesson, the teacher was based on specific criteria (Sifakis, 2004b) and Burgess’ ‘ideational frameworks’ (1994) which can provide the organisation of the notes on which the listening input will be structured. The main concern was an *original* lesson, as regards listening input and tasks, in order to respond to Ls’ actual interests, linguistic and cognitive needs, overall competence and age (Tzotzou, 2014b). To this end, the teacher attempted to produce a comprehensible, interesting, relevant, neither too complex nor strictly graded listening input (Littlewood, 1984), which contains linguistic features a little beyond Ls’ current level of competence (Richards, 1983).

The topic is supposed to be of great relevance to their interests as the majority of Ls would like to visit London, the capital of the foreign country where English is spoken as native language. In this way, Ls have the opportunity to travel to London, although

only mentally, and start developing their target culture awareness as they come into contact with the capital of Britain, the most famous London sights and a traditional English song. It is also consistent with the curriculum orientation according to which Ls must be exposed to cognitive and linguistic schemata related to cross-cultural awareness and thus, multiculturalism (Tzotzou, 2013).

To create the listening input the teacher prepared a sheet of notes built up in a flow chart model according to Burgess' (1994) ideational frameworks (see the Appendix), in order to achieve a detailed summary of the London Sightseeing, and then produced the spoken discourse following this flow chart. Afterwards, a detailed lesson plan was constructed by taking into account and noting down Ls' profile, defining the main aim and the specific objectives of the course as well as describing the procedure, making clear the three stages – pre-, while- and post-listening stages – and specifying the objectives, the tasks and the time allocated for each stage.

Class Profile

Knowing our Ls is crucial and necessary in making informed decisions on the teaching methodology to use in order to achieve the best learning outcomes and motivate them appropriately, helping them at the same time to be active participants in the classroom and outside it as well. On that basis, profiling language Ls is an important parameter which comprises both immediately observable features and not immediately observable features (Sifakis, 2004a).

In the present case, Ls' profile is outlined according to Woodward's (2001) descriptive parameters. To start with, it is a 5th grade primary class with 20 Ls (sex ratio: 11 girls and 9 boys); they are all about 11 years old, in other words there is no age diversity, their mother tongue is modern Greek, that is, it is a monolingual class, and they share, more or less, similar cultural conventions, expectations or even prejudices (national homogeneity). Based on the evidence available and observable to the teacher so far, one could say that this class is more or less a homogeneous one with regard to Ls' language skills, levels, educational background, language aptitude, interests, learning style and strategies (Tzotzou, 2014b). As regards Ls' target language competence and self-confidence, there seem to be some differences, as there are 'brighter' Ls and 'weaker' ones (different levels of proficiency); however, there have been no serious learning disabilities so far. Their reference level according to the so-called Common Reference Levels of the Common European Framework (CEF, Council of Europe, 2001) is supposed to be the basic one called 'basic user', in between A1 'Breakthrough' and A2 'Waystage' (Tzotzou, 2014b, p. 64).

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the lesson was to foster target culture awareness by developing primary Ls' listening skills and microskills. To this end, the specific pedagogical aims/objectives were to a. develop Ls' listening comprehension, b. foster vocabulary

acquisition, c. achieve skills integration, d. enhance Ls' collaboration, e. develop Ls' listening microskills, f. develop Ls' metacognitive skills and g. raise their awareness of the British capital.

Listening Tasks – Reflection on Tasks' Efficiency

The interrelation between the listening input and the learning activities/tasks was the ultimate aim of the present original listening lesson (all tasks are available at the following link <https://www.dropbox.com/s/62b46f1yq7vypr2/tasks.pdf?dl=0>). Listening tasks were designed to be meaningful and purposeful in order for Ls to attend what they hear, process it and respond to it by making them feel active, original listeners, motivated and willing to understand (Anderson & Lynch, 1988, p.74). To this end, tasks were carefully constructed to reflect real-life situations to a great extent avoiding exercises which demand exact recall of verbal detail, multiple-choice or True/False questions which may disorientate Ls making them think that if they do not understand every single word they have failed (Porter & Roberts, 1981; Sheerin, 1987).

In particular, the tasks include active predicting / guessing as a lead in activity in order to motivate Ls, activate their content schemata and create expectations by asking them key questions at first (Carrell, 1987; Porter & Roberts, 1981). What follows is a note-taking task which is a valuable real-life skill (Richards, 1983; Rost, 2011) and a matching activity while listening to the audio text to make Ls feel active listeners, retain their attention and enhance their listening comprehension. Peer correction is also encouraged to make them feel responsible and help them monitor their own success in getting a message across (Porter & Roberts, 1981). Afterwards, a group work activity based on the listening input follows focusing on the integration of skills such as writing, listening and speaking to promote Ls' interaction through note making/transferring, writing and an information gap task. For further listening as well as pronunciation practice and in order to have fun, Ls are also invited to listen to a traditional British song entitled 'London Bridge is falling down' (available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/591qt8jl490fdcc/London%20Bridge%20Is%20Falling%20Down%20Nursery%20Rhymes%20with%20LyricsPopular%20Baby%20Songs.mp3?dl=0>). Ls work in pairs in order to do a jigsaw activity and to sing the song as a whole class at the end, aiming at the same time to make them relax by creating an enjoyable classroom atmosphere (Griffiee, 1992).

As a follow up task (both homework and in-class work), Ls are asked to work in their groups again to carry out a project relevant to the listening input and the topic of this listening lesson by collecting information about other London sights through webquest and by creating a relevant poster or leaflets in order to decorate their classroom. In this way, experiential language learning can be encouraged while at the same time Ls' creative, collaborative and interpersonal skills can be promoted (Nunan, 1992). Finally, there has been an extensive use of group work in the classroom and outside it because it enables Ls to produce fluency, reduces anxiety,

increases commitment to learning and contributes to both Ls' cognitive and affective development (Chryshohoos J., Chryshohoos N. & Thompson, 2002).

Procedure-Stages of the Lesson

Pre-listening Stage

The pre-listening stage (time allocated: 3-5min) introduces the topic which, in the present listening lesson, is about a trip to London, the capital of England. The teacher invites Ls to imagine that they are tourists in London visiting its most famous sights (Big Ben, the Buckingham Palace, the British Museum, the Tower of London) in order to provide a listening purpose, motivate Ls to listen and help them tune into the listening input in a natural way. To this end, as a warm-up task the teacher shows the British flag and a map eliciting Ls' guesses and predictions.

Steps/Tasks: 1. The teacher introduces the topic showing Ls the flag and map of Britain, the country where English is spoken as a native language asking Ls questions such as, *Whose (country) is this flag? Look at the map and point to the capital city of this country. What language is spoken there? Have you ever heard about London? What do you know about London/Britain?* 2. A predicting/guessing activity follows: Ls look at the map/flag to make guesses about the country, the capital and the language spoken.

Objectives: The pre-listening tasks aim to activate prior world knowledge and relevant content schemata as well as to motivate Ls by creating expectations.

While-listening Stage

While-listening stage (time allocated: 10-12min) is based on activities which help Ls find their way through the listening text and build upon their expectations raised by the pre-listening activities taking into consideration topic familiarity, background knowledge and listening purpose (Vandergrift, 2002). In the present original listening lesson Ls are asked to imagine themselves as belonging to a group of tourists in London who listen to the monologue of a tour guide while visiting the four famous London sights mentioned before in an attempt to help them make further predictions by analogy, using their world knowledge (Sheerin, 1987). In this way, Ls are given the opportunity to practice both their top-down and bottom-up processing capabilities by engaging them in a real-life, meaningful context (Vandergrift, 2002). To contextualize the auditory input further, visual support is also provided during listening by showing Ls postcards with the four famous London sights in order to help them predict and interpret the listening material more accurately (Sheerin, 1987; Vandergrift, 2002). While listening Ls carry out a note-taking task first and, after replaying the listening input, they do a matching activity followed by peer correction.

Steps/Tasks: 1. Ls listen to a tour guide's narrative on London Sightseeing (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/27yyo65ywm10xtv/London-sos.mp3?dl=0>) looking at

the same time at the relevant postcards shown on the board, 2. Ls take notes on a sheet of paper working on their own, 3. Ls listen to the narrative twice in order to do a matching activity, 4. after doing the matching, Ls work in pairs to correct each other (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/62b46f1yq7vypr2/tasks.pdf?dl=0>).

Objectives: The while-listening tasks aim to make Ls listen for specific information and for gist, to motivate them by visual aids, to integrate listening with writing, to make Ls active listeners, to check comprehension and to encourage peer correction.

Post-listening Stage

In the post-listening stage (time allocated: 25-30min), there is an attempt to integrate all four skills progressing from oracy to literacy (productive skills of speaking and writing) depending on the Ls' specific needs, interests, competence (Tzotzou, 2014a), as well as the curriculum specifications (Sifakis, 2004b). To this end, Ls are divided into groups and provided with a list of key words in alphabetical order (as a mini-dictionary) to facilitate them and help them make predictions, interpretations and logical connections by analogy on their own. Each group makes notes about a certain London sight by reconstructing what they have already heard. Being based on key points provided to them, they write a relevant paragraph, report back to the class and an information gap activity follows with the other groups trying to answer questions. To close this listening lesson in a pleasant and funny way, Ls are asked to listen to a traditional English song related to the listening input; they carry out a jigsaw activity working in pairs and sing the song all together for pronunciation practice as well.

Steps/Tasks: 1. Ls are divided into 4 groups a. each group is provided with a card with key words, b. each group re-constructs the information about a different London sight based on what they have already heard to write a paragraph, c. each group reports back to the class, d. the other groups are given cards with questions to answer (information-gap), e. feedback is provided by the whole class (Ls' interaction) and the teacher. 2. Ls listen to a traditional English song about London to put its mixed-up parts/verses in the right order working in pairs. Ls listen again to check their answers and sing the song all together. 3. Ls are given a self-assessment questionnaire to fill in by ticking (✓) what's true for them in order to get a lesson feedback as well (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/62b46f1yq7vypr2/tasks.pdf?dl=0>).

Objectives: The post-listening tasks aim to consolidate vocabulary, to motivate Ls make notes, to enhance group work, to promote Ls' interaction, to achieve skills integration (writing, listening and speaking), to carry out a jigsaw task, to listen and sing, to practice pronunciation and to listen for fun.

Post-lesson Evaluation of the Teaching Outcomes

The teaching outcomes have been satisfactory to a great extent as Ls managed to carry out all the tasks and effectively develop their communicative skills. Whenever

Ls met some difficulties, the teacher tried to simplify the whole procedure giving explanations either in the target language or their mother tongue where necessary since it is a monolingual class and mother tongue is not forbidden. The teacher also provided Ls with visual support from the very beginning and an alphabetical list of key words (the list is available at the following link <https://www.dropbox.com/s/jxwx687xzzzpxaq/key-vocabulary.pdf?dl=0>) which is thematically related to the auditory input to facilitate their work and make them feel self-confident, independent and more self-directed in the post-listening stage.

The discourse produced by Ls was mainly a response to the tasks or demand for further explanations. The listening tasks have been purposeful allowing Ls to predict and re-construct information, monitor their partner's performance and be active, more or less, real life listeners. In addition to the above, group working encouraged Ls' active and collaborative involvement, language practice and interaction. Moreover, in some tasks there was an attempt to involve Ls in peer correction work to enhance their responsibility and collaborative skills.

In this context, the teacher's role has been manifold starting from being the listening input provider and the task designer, moving to a more crucial role, as monitor and facilitator of the overall learning process by providing the necessary feedback in a regular and systematic way. Especially, in the teaching of listening one aspect of task monitoring that merits careful attention is related to time. That is why, in the present original listening lesson there was an attempt to define very carefully the 'time on task' and the 'wait time', the time needed on the part of the Ls to cognitively process particular tasks or questions bearing in mind that the listening process itself is hidden (Vandergrift, 2004).

Finally, the teacher's task was primarily to provide Ls with the necessary information and support or facilitation at suitable points in an attempt to raise their awareness of learning strategies and metacognitive skills in an autonomous and experiential way (Nunan, 1992). To this end, there was also a relevant self-assessment questionnaire for Ls to tick for themselves to get the necessary feedback at the end and draw conclusions about the whole learning and teaching procedure.

Conclusion

The present teaching proposal placed emphasis on the process view of listening, changing the role of the learner-listener from someone passively receiving the listening input to an active participant in the act. Given that listening is a complex skill that needs to be developed consciously, Ls had the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning how to listen. What is more, the listening tasks stimulated Ls to reflect on the process of listening without the threat of evaluation (Vandergrift, 2002). They interacted with the input and the whole listening task encouraging their collaboration with classmates and thus expanding the communicative context. This process-oriented lesson actively engaged Ls and

convinced them to work to the best of their potential through tasks that imitate real-life acts towards improving performance in listening as well as in learning the foreign language. In other words, listening was seen as a dynamic interactive process which necessitates a more comprehensive approach to teaching listening in order to help Ls meet the challenge of real-life listening.

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APPENDIX

BURGESS' 'IDEATIONAL FRAMEWORK' (1994)

