

LISTENING FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING: (RE)DISCOVERING STUDENTS' AUTONOMY

Abstract: The aim of this text is to discuss the possibilities of making students' natural listening habits more beneficial for their language learning. The article reflects on difficulties with listening that students themselves identify and tries to provide an insight into their practices by referring to the concepts of autonomous learning. It will be suggested that it is the lack of learning awareness and metacognitive skills that prevents students from developing their listening skills. The text also includes suggestions for practical activities that may contribute to developing these skills in class and which allow students to use them outside of the classroom itself.

Keywords: listening skills, self-assessment, reflection, multiple intelligences, study skills, metacognitive skills, autonomous learning

SŁUCHANIE W NAUCE JĘZYKÓW OBCYCH: (PONOWNE) ODKRYWANIE AUTONOMII UCZNIÓW

Streszczenie: Celem tego artykułu jest wykorzystanie naturalnych umiejętności słuchania w nauce języków obcych. Tekst opisuje trudności w słuchaniu, które uczniowie samodzielnie identyfikują, i przedstawia proces uczenia się, odwołując się do koncepcji autonomii tego procesu. Autorka sugeruje się, że to brak świadomości uczenia się i umiejętności metapoznawczych uniemożliwia uczniom rozwijanie rozumienia ze słuchu. Artykuł zawiera również propozycje praktycznych działań, które mogą się przyczynić do rozwoju tych umiejętności w klasie i ułatwić uczniom korzystanie z nich poza klasą.

Słowa kluczowe: umiejętność rozumienia ze słuchu, samoocena, refleksja, wielorakie inteligencje, umiejętności uczenia się, umiejętności metakognitywne, autonomiczne uczenie się

1. Introduction

From *Peppa Pig* to *Game of Thrones*, our students have usually been exposed to authentic listening materials in English on a regular basis for many years, with

most of the exposure happening outside their language classes. However, many of our students still find listening comprehension to be the most difficult language competence and it can be observed that frequent listening practice does not have much impact on students' language production.

After noticing this paradoxical situation, I started to pay more attention to listening in my teaching practice and tried to find explanations for what prevents students from learning more from watching series or listening to music. This article suggests that students may first need to (re)discover what autonomous learning is in order to be able to benefit from their free time listening routines. The aim is also to share activities that a teacher can use in class to initiate an autonomous development of listening skills outside of the classroom.

First, my teaching context and the courses I teach will be introduced, then, I will present problems with listening my students report to have. The following sections will include some theoretical reflection on the problems and practical suggestions on how those issues may be addressed.

2. Teaching context – listening skills in and outside of class

The article is based on my experience with teaching English language courses at the Masaryk University Language Centre. I am based at the Faculty of Arts unit and the observations in this text are related to my teaching of courses of English for Academic Purposes and to being one of the language advisors and module leaders of the English Autonomously (EA) course. Within the English Autonomously framework, students create their own study plans and choose modules that they want to study. With regard to both courses, I will here only focus on listening skills, however, the implications may often be relevant for the development of other skills too.

The study plans of the English Autonomously course consist of 50 hours, typically, about half of it is devoted to students' individual activities. Students discuss and finalise their plans with advisors; these advising sessions should ensure that the plans meet students' needs and correspond to their learning preferences too. During the sessions I have witnessed that students usually lack the metacognitive skills and awareness necessary to plan, monitor and evaluate their autonomous (listening) practice. When writing their study plans for the English Autonomously course, almost every student includes some listening practice among their individual (outside of class) activities. However, what they primarily want to improve are their speaking skills. When asked how they could work on this skill within their individual study, the students usually say: "I could watch some videos." The subsequent discussion with an advisor usually reveals that they do not know how to bridge this gap between their (listening) practices and their needs (speaking). Some students are aware of their problems with choosing sources and finding appropriate ways to learn. But most of them are not used to reflecting on their learning process and its efficiency.

Therefore, as an advisor, I try to help them first analyse their listening habits. Then, I encourage them to look for new ways of listening that would be more useful for their learning. We discuss the possibilities of more appropriate and challenging sources and try to find out how students could interact with the texts. We consider alternative ways of taking notes, responding, imitating, or providing dubbing. Ideally, the students themselves realise what their specific needs are and how they may be addressed. I shall mention such a successful example of autonomous student behaviour later in this text.

To investigate the issues related to listening skills in my Academic English classes, I have included new questions into my course evaluation questionnaires. As this is an exam course, the students were asked to decide which part of the exam was the most difficult for them. In all my seminar groups, listening was considered to be the most difficult skill. In their comments on listening, students often mentioned that they need to listen more times to fully understand the text and that they struggle with fast texts. This proved that even if our students do not lack exposure to authentic materials in English, it is difficult for them to master more advanced listening skills in an autonomous way. Based on this (for me surprising) discovery, I prepared a module focusing on listening for the English Autonomously course and introduced some of those activities into my Academic English classes too.

3. Raising Learning Awareness

When designing the module, I considered Little's definition of learner autonomy as "drawing together the threads of self-assessment, goal-setting and reflection" (1991). First, I planned a series of activities that should help students to self-assess their skills and also to identify their learning styles. The activities included, for example, an introduction to the concept of multiple intelligences. The aim was to increase students' learning awareness of what Gardner (1991) describes as: "Students possess different kinds of minds and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways." Based on my experience, students are usually not aware of these differences, although Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences is familiar to (language) teachers. I believe that it is worth incorporating these issues into our teaching and introducing them to students. Be it a short experiment in class, group discussion or individual homework assignment, discovering their multiple intelligences and various learning styles can be a mind-opening experience for our students. In the following paragraphs, I am going to describe some of my favourite activities.

The easiest way for students to self-assess themselves is to use some existing online tools, e.g., questionnaires, quizzes. I use a simple multiple intelligences quiz created by Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency.¹ This quiz gives students their

¹ Education Planner. Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency. Available at <http://www.educationplanner.org/students/self-assessments/learning-styles.shtml> [accessed: 15 May 2020].

scores in three primary types of intelligences: auditory, visual and tactile. I ask my students to do the quiz at home; at the module meeting or in class we would briefly compare and discuss their scores. The group can also try to find what they have in common and use this information when setting some shared goals. One group of my students identified that they could best use their visual and tactile capacities, as a result we decided to use more video sources and to create additional visual materials.

To make students fully aware of their natural learning preferences, I also run a short experiment. The students are given a mini-presentation with a couple of slides explaining what multiple intelligences are and combining different ways of input – e.g., spoken and written text, numbers, a scheme, a photo, colour-coding. After the mini-presentation, the students' task is to first summarise what they have learnt, then, we analyse what exactly they remember. By reconstructing the information and the way it was provided, they reflect on their learning and remembering. My experience shows that visual intelligence is very often the strongest for (not only) students nowadays. My students hardly ever remember the year relating to the quote and if so, they remember seeing it, not hearing it. The majority of my students noticed what Gardner looks like even if his photo was not commented on, many of them remembered what colour his jacket was. On the other hand, very few students recalled that naturalist intelligence was added to the list as the eighth type because this information was only delivered by speaking and was not highlighted visually. This activity thus allows students to make observations about their learning and inspires them to look for ways of learning that are more efficient. Raising awareness of multiple intelligences and various learning styles is the necessary first step to autonomous learning. Once students are not only able to self-assess their skills, but also know themselves as learners, they are ready to take control over their learning.

4. Fostering metacognition

As was mentioned before, my students often perceive listening as being a difficult skill for them, however, when setting their goals, they rather focus on other skills, typically speaking. Taking this situation into consideration, I tried to employ authentic listening materials that deal with speaking skills as a topic and to create related tasks that would be relevant to students' needs and goals. Based on Little's concept of learning process, I decided to use the English language as a communication medium for acquiring new information and skills:

Language is the tool with which knowledge and skills are mediated and the learning process is shaped. Shaping the learning process is a matter of communication – describing and analysing the task in hand, evaluating the merits of different approaches, giving instructions, proposing alternatives, and so on (Little, Dam, Legenhausen, 2017).

With regard to my students' university background, I started to use videos on presentation skills or debate skills as an information input source and a starting point

for discussions and group tasks. Many international universities publish study skills videos on their websites, I have been using Student Toolkits produced at the University of British Columbia for e.g., presentation skills.² My students usually watch the videos at home; in class they summarise and critically evaluate the content in discussions that lead into writing guidelines, checklists or posters. I believe that employing these authentic materials in such a way is highly rewarding for integrated skills training as both the content and form is relevant to students' needs. The tone and genre (semi-formal spoken text with much visual support) correspond to the students' level and the language is appropriately challenging (quite fast with some new vocabulary that can be guessed from the context). As a result, students are capable of naturally applying the information and language gained from the listening into their speaking or writing. This corresponds to Little's argument:

When the goal of learning is the development of communicative proficiency in a second language, we must help learners to use the TL as the medium not only of task performance but also of metacognition and metalinguistic reflection. If we fail to do this, we run the risk that their proficiency will remain superficial and will never become fully internalized (Little, Dam, Legenhausen, 2017).

Thus, it is even more beneficial, when students themselves search, evaluate and select useful sources. They can be, for example, asked to bring tips on interesting instructive videos into the class discussion. Such an easy to set homework assignment can really support students' autonomous learning by employing the target language as the tool for metacognition.

When setting their goals, my students often identify that what they lack in the area of listening skills is to "be able to understand lectures." As discussed before, they are not able to benefit from their natural listening habits and develop more advanced skills in English. They might be listening to TED talks frequently, yet they struggle when exposed to longer and more complex talks. Therefore, I have created activities based on semi-academic videos that aim at supporting the autonomous development of lecture skills.

To let students reflect on their listening practices and to monitor whether they correspond to their learning goals, we use the following task: students are given various instructions for note taking – different limits on what items and how many of them they should note down while listening (e.g., 1 key phrase + 1 number, 5 key words, 20 words, 1 scheme). The notes are used by different students in the follow-up activity. Based on the notes, students are asked to summarise the content of the listening text. As they have to work with someone else's notes in a given format, students have a chance to observe the (dis)advantages of various note-taking styles. The reflection ideally leads students to a realization that efficient note-taking may be fostering both an understanding and the remembering of

² *Student Toolkits*. University of British Columbia. Available at <https://learningcommons.ubc.ca/student-toolkits/presentation-skills/> [accessed: 15 May 2020].

new information. As a result, students should be more careful when choosing their learning methods and planning their listening practice according to their goals.

Even if the ability to choose ideal methods is considered crucial for autonomous learning, according to my experience, students have little experience with practicing this metacognitive skill. Based on Benson's teaching principle that "our job is to create learning opportunities, not to impose a method. There's no one way to learn a language" (2001), I wanted to give my students more chances to try out various listening practices and to exchange their ideas about this experience. A natural lead-in proved to be a discussion on the use of subtitles. Students can discuss if they prefer no subtitles, subtitles in L1 or subtitles in L2 quite readily, since they tend to already have an opinion on this issue. Such a discussion is authentic and can easily demonstrate that there exists a variety of possible benefits of each method. It can be followed by a task for students to explore new ways of using subtitles. These explorations have been inspiring for students and for me too. Depending on their various learning styles and goals, the students' approach differs, e.g., one of my students used subtitles to practice grammar. By comparing the Czech and English versions of the subtitles, he was able to improve his understanding of the use of past tenses. His approach was very autonomous as he was able to find a method that corresponded to his individual needs.

To further investigate students' listening practices, I like to use "silent" or "blind" videos. The activities, either based exclusively on audio or exclusively on visual input, should foster concentration and detailed comprehension. Students are asked to listen to multiple speakers participating at interviews or debates and to analyse the different voices, to visualise the speakers etc. According to my experience, focusing on the audio input only is an unusual experience for students nowadays. I make sure that the task for this "blind" listening is set in a very open way. The students are welcome to make guesses and to answer questions like: "Who do you think is speaking? Which voice is the most pleasant one for you? What are the voices like? Which accent was the least comprehensive for you?" I assure students that there are no wrong answers. However, I try to elicit as specific an answer and explanation as possible. This strategy allows students who are not confident about their listening skills to make a valid contribution, e.g., about a difficult accent, the age of the speaker etc. To conclude this activity, I show parts of the video material and confirm the right suggestions. As a result, the students should feel positively assured about their skills, they should gain more confidence about their ability to focus and they should value concentration more.

Using "silent" videos can be recommended as a task working with students' pre-understanding and with their ability to understand details. When watching videos with no sound, students can be asked to predict the text – its content or language, e.g., what vocabulary will be used, what grammar forms, which register. When listening to the text, students then listen for specific information and verify their predictions. This activity aims at developing students' ability to plan

their listening, to choose a method appropriate to their goal, as well as to monitor its efficiency. Including metacognitive tasks into the listening process (predicting what the text might include, planning what to focus on and how, monitoring what has been learnt) should make the practice more efficient. Thus, this class activity should become a model for students' autonomous listening activities outside of the classroom.

The need to plan and monitor autonomous learning activities can be emphasised by the following activity. I show students a short entertaining clip in a third language (not English, not the students' L1) and give them very vague instructions to "learn something from it." After watching the clip, students are asked to share what they have learnt and to discuss the efficiency of this listening activity. They are usually only able to recall a few words from the video and realise clearly that random listening is hardly sufficient for language learning. The activity aims at showing that there are many limitations to unplanned, unfocused and unstructured listening practices. Although I acknowledge the importance of the fun factor for learning and confidence building, I hope to make my students understand that if they want to develop their (listening) skills through "watching videos," they need to pay enough attention to goal-setting, choosing the right sources and methods and monitoring their progress.

5. Conclusion

This article was written to provide an overview of those interventions I have introduced into my teaching to foster my students' autonomous listening practices. The contradiction between students' frequent exposure to listening sources and their lack of improvement in listening inspired me to look for explanations and to change my approach. Based on autonomous learning principles, I believe that students need to self-assess not only their skills, but also their learning styles and preferences to be able to learn in an autonomous way. I experienced that by introducing self-assessment and reflection as language activities that can become a highly rewarding part of an English course at university level. Similarly, combining integrated skills training with reflective and critical thinking tasks has proven to be very beneficial in my classes. I suggest that if students are encouraged to analyse their existing (listening) practices, are given a chance to try out new ways of approaching materials, leading to a defining of their specific aims and when they are supported in finding appropriate methods, they will be much better equipped for improving their listening skills outside of the classroom.

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