Exploring listening skills in pre-intermediate students

Exploring listening skills in pre-intermediate students

Lela Tsagareishvili

Lela works with students from diverse backgrounds in southwest Georgia. Since she identified her learners were experiencing challenges during listening tasks, she decided to investigate this matter further. From her findings, she realised the importance of providing supporting mechanisms to avoid students' frustration when doing listening tasks and boost their confidence.

Teaching context

I have been working at Akhaltsikhe Public School No.5 as an English teacher since 1999. This school is in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region in Georgia, and it is one of the biggest schools in the region with more than 1,500 students from grade one to grade 12. Students in this school come from different origins, social, religious and cultural backgrounds.

Akhaltsikhe Public School No.5

Research focus

There were several reasons why I decided to focus on listening skills. First, listening was one of the most challenging skills for my students, due to lack of communication with native speakers. Second, most of my learners tended to catch the main idea of the listening task better than listening for specific information, which was problematic. Third, most of the learners lost interest in listening to audio when they failed to understand. Finally, learners often felt nervous and embarrassed when doing a listening task.

This is why, from the beginning, I identified what I wanted to learn more about it. So, I came up with my exploratory questions.

1. What strategies do I use when my students fail to understand listening?
2. How do my learners feel when they face difficulties while doing a listening task?
3. How do my learners feel about listening to a fluent speaker?

To answer these questions, I decided to conduct a focus group, keep a reflective journal, and apply a questionnaire.

I created a questionnaire and asked all my eighth-grade students to fill it in anonymously so that they could feel free to state any opinion without fear of being embarrassed or judged by anybody. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions in English, but the students were explained the questions in advance, and in case of any difficulties they could use their native language to answer them.

My colleagues carried out the focus group because I wanted to allow my students to speak freely without my presence so they would not be limited to expressing their ideas for fear of 'upsetting the teacher'. 12 students (five boys and seven girls) participated in the focus group. They volunteered to participate and were chosen according to their level of English to have a representative from different levels (four high-level students, four middle and four low-level students). The focus group was carried out in Georgian to make students feel more comfortable and safer. The 11 questions were designed to address the exploratory questions. They focused on the students' perceptions of how the English class activities were planned and how they felt while participating in listening activities.

Additionally, I kept a reflective journal where I asked myself questions about my actions in case of my students' failure when doing listening tasks, about the quality and complexity of the listening materials I provided to my students, and the background knowledge and interests of my students.

Findings

In relation to the strategies I use when my students fail to understand listening, the data suggests that I used a variety of strategies to help students listen better, for example in the focus group students said that I provided them with pre-, while and post-listening activities to make the listening task easier to understand. In the questionnaire, half of the students (ten) mentioned that the teacher did pre-teaching of vocabulary and prediction activities to make the task easier to understand.

One of the students stated: 'I can understand the task better when I know the context and general idea of it beforehand.' I noted in the journal that I also 'use a lot of strategies to check the strengths and/or the weaknesses of a listening task; 'two stars and a wish' activity, exit tickets, assessment rubrics, etc.' Additionally, I encouraged the students to make notes while listening, though not all of them made notes during each listening task; 'It is hard to take notes while also keeping up with the listening task,' mentioned one learner. Furthermore, data from the reflective journal suggested that I did not always consider my learners' interests when choosing a recording which may have hindered their desire to engage in listening activities.

According to the questionnaire, 12 out of 20 learners felt nervous and embarrassed when doing a listening task, due to a lack of appropriate vocabulary and fast speed of the recording. Four mentioned difficulties with pronunciation, as there was a difference between the textbook audios and authentic audios. The school textbook audios tended to be easier to understand due to their slower pace and easier vocabulary, but authentic audio materials were more advanced and did not contain familiar words or phrases. Also, eight learners identified filling the gaps as the most challenging task, while four mentioned multiple choice, two mentioned ordering the sequence and three pairing words and phrases, 'Sometimes multiple-choice answers are very similar and confusing' reported one of the students. However, students reported on ways their challenges when listening could be addressed. A few learners suggested using the transcript of the audio material, especially when listening for the first time. During the focus group, one of the students stated: 'Reading and listening at the same time would make it easier'. Students also mentioned that they preferred doing listening tasks at home where they could stop and pause the recording as many times as they wanted, to understand better and not to feel embarrassed when they were not as quick as others.

Finally, the findings suggested that learners have mixed feelings when listening to fluent speakers, with half of them (ten) feeling nervous, eight motivated and two confused. I noted that my learners were more motivated when they listened to a speaker they knew (a famous singer, actor, or celebrity). The main difficulty reported by learners was coping with the speed and vocabulary of native speakers. Most learners (13) indicated the main difficulty they had when listening to a native speaker was rapid speech and lack of vocabulary. Four mentioned difficulties with pronunciation and two mentioned the differences between British English and American English: 'Sometimes it is hard to understand the British accent because they might use different words or stress for the same things or words in English than Americans do,' stated one of my students. In many cases, my students preferred to rely on some external features - like images, or existing knowledge about the person/people or images they were listening to or about, to connect their background knowledge with the new learning material. Among the strategies they employed to understand the audios, 15 said they paid attention to the words previously taught by the teacher before the listening task, 12 admitted that they used some tips to help themselves understand the main idea of the audio (such as relying on familiar words and expressions), ten tried to guess from the context, six of them paid attention to the intonation and pace, and four took notes when listening.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that students lost interest in listening to audio when they failed to understand. The pace and pronunciation played a big role in their frustration, thus students reported that the transcript of the listening activity would be helpful. Findings also showed that learners liked it when the teacher provided them with pre-, during- and post-listening activities to make the listening task easier to understand.

Proposed action plan

According to the results, I propose an action plan that includes using different strategies to help my students feel less nervous and embarrassed when failing a listening task. For instance, we can watch educational movies showing the same problems with students from different countries so that my students realise they are not an exception. Also, I will let my students listen to audios at a more comfortable pace and speed for them. Also, doing various simple short listening activities daily will help my learners train their ears in a safe environment, where errors are a part of their daily routine.

Final reflections

I had always believed that conducting research was an auxiliary practice for higher education institutions and universities and doing anything like that at school would be too challenging and less valuable. Research is often seen as an academic activity conducted by managers and/or policymakers and is not a concept respected by practitioners. Now, I believe that educators who are involved or conduct research themselves, are learning, exploring, analysing information, adapting their practice based on their research findings, and looking for improvement.

I plan to continue researching the needs of my students and my school, to develop new knowledge that is both of high quality and reliable to foster the innovation of services that meet existing needs.

The author

'I had always believed that conducting research was an auxiliary practice for higher education institutions and universities [..] Now I believe that educators who are involved or conduct the research themselves are learning, exploring, analysing information, adapting their practice based on their research findings and looking for improvement.'

My name is Lela Tsagareishvili. I am from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region in Georgia, from the city of Akhaltsikhe. As an English teacher, I often teach students from first to 12th grade, which gives me an opportunity to watch their growth and personal development and makes me not only a teacher for my students, but also their companion and friend, and I love this aspect of my profession. In 2022 I obtained the status of a mentoring teacher, which was the result of my challenging work as a teacher, as a colleague and as a person seeking new endeavours. I have participated in many national and international conferences, study visits and training opportunities, such as the TEA programme (Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement Program at George Mason University, organised by the US Embassy in Georgia) and a teachers' refreshment course in London. I worked as a teacher trainer and trainers' trainer for different programmes for the British Council and the American Embassy in Georgia. I believe that teachers can make a change and therefore I consider my profession as one of the most important to change the world.