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ISSUES OF ORAL COMPREHENSION COMPETENCE: DIFFICULTIES OF LISTENING AND STRATEGIES OF OVERCOMING THEM

Objective. This paper seeks to reveal such methodological issues as difficulties of oral comprehension and effective strategies of overcoming them. Among the difficulties of listening subject to analysis are those caused by linguistic, sociolinguistic and socio-cultural information, the conditions of listening, individual characteristics of a speaker and a listener, and the content of the heard text. Among the strategies that may help students overcome the difficulties of listening comprehension metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective plans of actions seem to turn out efficacious. The idea is emphasized that the impediments, which students may encounter in the process of listening may significantly hinder and retard their acquisition of listening comprehension competence that is why it is expedient to examine and characterize the diversified listening strategies conducive to developing listening abilities of learners.

Methods. The effectiveness of the suggested strategies targeted at overcoming difficulties of listening comprehension has been tested in a pedagogical experiment adapted for the students majoring in Bilingual Pedagogy.

Results. The experiment has proven that the rational combination of the employed strategies can help students overcome difficulties of oral comprehension and significantly improve the outcome of listening. Respectively, these strategies may boost learners' listening capacity, which is the threshold at which a student can comprehend 75% of the heard content. This capacity often serves as an indicator of a listener's ability to comprehend oral language. It is also known as the ground for advancing listening comprehension competence.

Conclusions. A high level of students' oral comprehension competence may be dependent on various factors, among which are the level of foreign language proficiency and listening capacity of the recipients themselves, the linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural content of the perceived information, and listening comprehension conditions. The issues that occur in the course of listening may be solved due to the employed strategies, or plans of actions, which serve as listening aids in overcoming the obstacles of listening.

Keywords: oral comprehension; listening ability; listening comprehension competence; difficulties of listening; strategies of listening.

Introduction. Conventionally, listening comprehension (LC) is considered to be one of the most complex and complicated activities in FL acquisition. There are various reasons why students find listening in a FL really hard, so it is relevant to consider

alternative approaches to the classification of LC difficulties and suggest diversified strategies, which may significantly improve the comprehension of a FL text and increase the level of students' LCC.

Theoretical background. A number of scholars address the issue of LC and study it within different frameworks and from various perspectives. Inter alia, J. Gary, J. Miller, and O. Vovk establish the fundamentals of listening; J. Field, K. Lems, N. Osada, and P. Ur reveal the basic features of LC; J. Harmer, W. Rivers, L. Vandergift devise specific activities (both communicative and cognitive) targeted at fostering LC skills; R. Blair, A. Case, T. Derwing identify the difficulties arising in the process of listening; M. Bingol, J. Rubin, and M. Wilt elaborate effective strategies of overcoming the obstacles emerging at listening and fostering listening comprehension competence (LCC) of learners.

Statement of the Problem. Though the issue of fostering LCC is in the continuous focus of attention among numerous scholars majoring in Bilingual Pedagogy (specifically, in methods of teaching the English language), most of them do not correlate the difficulties of LC with the strategies, which may help to overcome them. With this in view, it deems plausible to take a closer look at these difficulties and see how they can be addressed to with the proposed strategies.

Methods. The efficacy of the suggested strategies aimed at helping learners to overcome the difficulties of LC has been proven in a pedagogical experiment adapted for the students majoring in Bilingual Pedagogy (the English and German Languages and Literature). The experiment was meant to expose how the employed strategies can improve LC and consequently, enhance the high level of LCC. The results of the experimental training in LC have revealed significant improvement in LC among testees. The positive results of the pedagogical experiment have exposed a sufficient progress in acquiring the sought-for level of LCC and displayed a considerable increase of listening skills and abilities of the students.

The level of their LCC increased from 70 to 92 points. The experimental training demonstrated the efficiency of the constructed methodology. The results were obtained through specially devised LC activities, quizzes, the viva voce and written examination taken by the students of experimental groups, and through questionnaires filled out by the testees who participated in the experiment.

Results and Discussion. The difficulties of LC in the English language have rather a complex nature that is why they require a detailed clarification and exemplification. O. Vovk singles out four major groups of difficulties encountered by FL learners, specifically [1, p. 193–196]:

1. Difficulties caused by linguistic information. They fall into three categories: phonetic, lexical, and grammatical. *Phonetic difficulties* stem from discrepancy in spelling and pronunciation (*daughter* – /'dɔ:tə/; *isle* /aɪl/; *tomb* /tu:m/); the absence of particular phonemes in the native tongue (/æ/, /ð/, /ŋ/, /θ/); change in the meaning due to stress patterns (in a sentence *I can't see you tomorrow* the meaning will vary depending on the stress placing, i.e. if *I* is stressed = *I can't see you, but someone else can*, stress on *tomorrow* = *but I can see you another day*, or on *can't* = *so forget about it*); differences in meanings between short and long vowels, as well as open and closed syllables (*rid* – *read*; *knit* – *neat*; *pit* – *Pete*; *pot* – *port*); assimilation processes (*gimme* = *give me*; *I dunno* = *I don't know*; *watchadoin?* = *what are you doing?*; *a cuppa tea* = *a cup of tea*; *fish 'n chips* = *fish and chips*; *I wanna go home* = *I want to go home*; *I gonna miss you* = *I am going to miss you*); variations in rhythmic patterns of an utterance; the contracted pronunciation (*they will* – *they'll*; *he is/he has* – *he's*; *you are* – *you're*; *it is* – *it's*).

The inability to identify the items below triggers off *lexical difficulties*: homophones (*route* – *root*; *son* – *sun*; *night* – *knight*; *write* – *right*; *weak* – *week*; *meat* – *meet*; *hair* – *hare*; *here* – *hear*; *read* – *reed*; *cent* – *sent* – *scent*; *need* – *knead*; *die* – *dye*), paronyms (*economical* – *economic*, *historical* – *historic*, *sensitive* – *sensible*, *human* – *humane*, *moral* – *morale*, *politic* – *political*, *envious* – *enviable*, *exhausting* – *exhaustive* – *exhaustible*, *credible* – *credulous*, *judicial* – *judicious*, *genial* – *genius*), antonyms (*ask* – *answer*; *give* – *take*; *open* – *close*; *east* – *west*), conversational formulae (*farewell*; *take care*; *no way*; *don't mention it*; *sorry, I didn't quite catch you*; *what's up?*; *what are you up to?*; *it'll do*), idiomatic phrases (*tarred with the same brush* – having the same faults or weaknesses; *have the bit between one's teeth* – be very enthusi-

astic about doing something; *in the offing* – likely to happen; *Bob's your uncle* – something that is resolved in one's favor without much effort), figurative meanings of a word, that appeared due to the associative links via metonymy, metaphor, etc. (*chicken* – a child, an inexperienced person; *odd fish* – a strange person; *snail* – a very slow person; *to pig* – to make a beast of oneself; *to parrot* – to senselessly repeat; *rabbit* – weak, timid person; *dark horse* – a person who/whose skills are yet unknown; *black sheep* – not fitting into a group or family), polysemantic words (*to coach* – to train in a sport, to give private lessons, to prepare for a particular situation; *passage* – driveway, corridor; *to wait* – to expect, to serve; *merit* – dignity, praise; *matter* – substance, subject; *flash* – outburst, moment) abbreviations (*ASAP* – as soon as possible; *QAS* – question and answer session; *AWOL* – absent without official leave; *the FBI* – Federal Bureau of Investigation; *Ph.D.* – Doctor of Philosophy; *H.U.* – Harvard University; *O.A.P.* – Old Age Pension(er); *OUP* – Oxford University Press); *ID* – identification; *CV* – Curriculum Vitae), specific realia (*'Tomorrow is another day'*; *convenience shop*; *Broadway*; *Wool-worth's*; *Macy's*; *Yellowstone Park*; *Yellow Pages*; *soda fountain*; *The White House*; *Buckingham Palace*; *Niagara Falls*; *Piccadilly Circus*; *Thanksgiving Day*; *"The Washington Post"*), false etymology (*magazine*, *velvet*, *complexion*, *intelligent*, *accurate*, *genial*), and non-verbalized sounds (*mm*, *uh-huh*, *oh*).

Among the *grammatical difficulties* the most problematic are the following: the dissimilarity in the syntactic structure of the English and native languages, namely: a) a definite word order (*I'd like to know who Tom is speaking to?* *Peter asked where you were from?*), ellipses (*Where to?* = *Where are you going?*; *Ready?* = *Are you ready?* *Failed again?* = *Have you failed again?* *Back soon?* *In a week.* = *Will you come back soon?* *I'll come back in a week.*), repetitions and pseudo-beginnings (*But the thing I liked, liked a lot, was – erm, do you remember that thing we saw, that sort of umbrella thingy?*; *Well, well; no, no; so-so*), gap-fillers (*I mean; as I say; I reckon; mind you; you know; well; let me see*), ungrammatical sentences (... *but they get a lot of holidays, don't they, teachers?*); b) conversion (*run* – *to run*; *talk* – *to talk*; *face* – *to face*; *like* – *to like*); c) grammatical homonymy (*to found* – to establish, to form *vs.* *found* – *Past Indefinite, Past Participle of to find*; /'ho:siz/ *horses* – *pl. f. vs. horse's* – *poss. case*; *a flat* (*n.*) – *dwelling vs. flat* (*adj.*) – *smooth and level*); d) the usage of infinitive and adjectival phrases as compared to the subordinate clauses in the mother tongue

(*Mother saw Peter running along the street. I want Mary to come in time. We noticed Tom enter the building.*); e) asyndetic subordinate clauses (*He told us ___ he would come soon.*); and f) phrasal verbs (*put on, put away, put up, put down*).

Furthermore, in the process of teaching LC the length of sentences should also be taken into consideration. According to J. Miller's investigation, the short-term memory capacity equals 7 ± 2 items [2, p. 82], that is why at the initial stages of learning students should not be overloaded with lengthy phrases and sentences. In the course of acquiring LCC the number of words should gradually be increased.

2. Difficulties caused by the LC conditions. M. Templin justly points out that physical aspects of the classroom or laboratory presentation, such as speed of presenting an utterance, length of segments, length of pauses, and the acoustics of the room, should be carefully regarded by the teacher because of their decisive effect on the value of activity [3, p. 87–88]. The point to be taken into account is that all utterances for LC should be delivered at a normal speed from the earliest lessons. The speed should not appear to a native speaker to be unduly labored – a speed that retains normal word groupings, elisions, liaisons, consonant assimilations, natural rhythm, and intonation [4, p. 112]. Even at the very early stages familiar material can be understood when pronounced at a normal speed. At more advanced stages, when unfamiliar words and phrases are intentionally included in comprehension activities, they should be embedded in so much easily recognizable material that the student is able to concentrate on comparing the new elements with the surrounding context and eliciting their meanings in this way.

The length of the segments presented in each group and the length of the pauses between the segments are of more importance than the actual speed of delivery within the segments. Research has shown that the auditory memory span for FL material is considerably less than for native-language material, probably on a ratio of nine words to fifteen [5, p. 96]. That is why a slight lengthening of the pauses will supply the extra time, which the mind requires to absorb the information, without adding a time element not available in normal conversation. For the same reason, LC exercises should contain a certain amount of repetitious material. This may take the form, for example, of explanations or descriptions in slightly different versions.

3. Difficulties derived from the individual characteristics of a speaker, i.e. his diction, timbre, articulation disorder, diversified

accents and dialects. M. Munro and T. Derwing claim that the exceeding amount of genres in accented speech will significantly reduce comprehension [6, p. 280]. Customarily, English learners get used to their teacher's speech and consequently, do not manage to understand somebody else's speaking. Surely, students must be concentrated on perceiving both male and female voices, as well as listening to speakers of different age brackets.

4. Difficulties resulted from the content of an alien text. Monologues are considered to be easier to comprehend as compared to dialogues; simultaneously, essays pose more problems to hearers than narrative texts. That is why much depends on aural memory of the recipient, and normally it takes time and practice to train it. Similarly, both in monologues and dialogues students may face *difficulties connected with comprehending sociolinguistic and socio-cultural information*. S. Brown rightly points out that "the marriage between language and culture is indivisible" [7, p. 15], that is why being unaware of traditions, customs, and norms of social behavior in definite situations can perplex the perceiving of incoming information.

Additionally, it is expedient to dwell on the LC difficulties stemming from the English national and regional literary accents. Commonly, the following variants of English accents are distinguished: British variant (Northern English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish accents); American variant (General American English, Eastern American, Southern American accents); Australian variant (General Australian accent). As a result, special audio material should be selected in order to teach diverse types of English pronunciation, namely, informative texts (advertisements, news clippings, interviews, reports), scientific texts (lectures, discussions and talks), and conversational texts (informal communication).

Scholars emphasize that the choice of the style of a text that students are going to listen to can drastically affect the outcome and success of LC. Teachers traditionally place a special emphasis on fiction texts, leaving unheeded journalistic materials like interviews, discussions, and reports. Definitely, the journalistic style offers templates of real life communication, and consequently, it is here that difficulties of text perception are likely to arise. They may be caused by the abundance of topics in a text, the absence of a clear author's standpoint, and the implicational nature of such texts.

The results obtained by A. Case [8] suggest some more factors, which cause inadequate LC. For a start, students try to understand every word they hear. Though in one's own language it appears to be quite easy to cope with missing chunks of speech having a conversation in a noisy street, many students are not able to transfer that skill to a FL. In most cases, learners should be taught to identify and single out the significant words that they need to listen out for.

Second, students' vocabulary is not copious enough. Consequently, learners are left behind trying to understand what a previous word meant and hear only the detached extracts, omitting the whole utterance. The possible solution to this problem is pre-listening activities, based on the vocabulary relevant for the topic under discussion.

Third, listeners do not recognize the words that they know, since they cannot distinguish between particular sounds, or conversely try to listen for differences that do not exist. In fact, this difficulty proves the necessity of phonetic drills along with LC skills enhancement.

As a final point, some students lacking listening stamina, may have a mental block arising from previously unpleasant listening experience, and easily get tired or distracted. Undoubtedly, utilizing easier texts at the initial stage will boost learners' confidence and encourage them for further listening activities. Moreover, there must be plenty of listening material, as well as indulging into listening outside the class, this way increasing implicit learning.

Apart from the issues discussed above, of great significance is the quality of the recorded material and sound system, since there is a lack of computers, smart boards, and multimedia systems, which apparently accelerate the progress of listening. Another difficulty is the inconvenience of classrooms that may in the same way turn out to be crucial in LC activities. In that case, factors like temperature, air conditioning, size of the classroom should also be taken into consideration and optimize the working process [9, p. 3–4]. On the other hand, physical discomfort is likely to distract the students. Motivation is one of the decisive factors that affect LC, so even the smallest pause in attention may considerably inhibit and retard comprehension.

The obtained findings in the field of study indicate that the LC problems are of varied nature, consequently, diversified measures should be taken in each particular case. In order to foster LC activities, solutions and strategies, described below, may be implemented.

The research of R. Blair illustrates, that the most important feature to consider in the process of LC is exposure to a FL. For in-

stance, when teaching English, it is advisable to provide students with opportunities to absorb the English sounds and to accumulate understanding. Another essential factor to improve the listening process is stress lowering. By making sure that the lessons are motivating, students are relieved of the stress and boredom that naturally block learning. Allowing the visibility of the speaker along with providing background clues fosters LC. In real life situations, listeners can usually see the person speaking, and facial expressions with gestures help them grasp what is being said. Pictures and other background clues will also provide a total framework and help students to listen globally to the whole message. Furthermore, the redundancies should also be mentioned here. In everyday conversation people tend to repeat and correct themselves, restart sentences several times and use fillers of different kinds. Students need experience in identifying and separating the main ideas from these redundancies, which are an integral part of everyone's speech [10, p. 159–160].

According to current researches on listening, effective FL acquisition implies students' being able to adjust their listening behavior to a variety of situations and listening purposes. For this reason, the methodology of teaching LC should provide learners with a set of appropriate listening strategies and match them to each listening situation. This will teach learners to become strategically smart.

So far, listening strategies have been considered as techniques or activities that contribute directly to language comprehension and to the recall of listening input [11, p. 634]. However, strategies may change due to the level of students' LCC, which is actually the key principle in the choice of activities. Scholars A. Chamot, C. Goh, J. O'Malley, L. Miller, A. Palmer, L. Vandergrift et al. have proposed a set of strategies, relevant for successful LC. Specifically, the evidence provided by C. Goh suggests that teaching listening strategies to students may turn out very helpful. And yet, it is not sufficient unless the teachers increase students' vocabulary, grammar, and phonology knowledge [9, p. 8]. L. Vandergrift claims that strategy development is important for LC training because strategies are "conscious means by which learners can guide and evaluate their own comprehension and responses" [12, p. 168].

In their study, J. O'Malley and A. Chamot have validated the approach to LC strategies, grounded on the cognitive theory. These scholars have differentiated and categorized the range of cognitive activities in language learning into two main types: metacognitive and cognitive [12, p. 169]. Specifically, metacognitive strategies are important because they oversee, regulate, or direct the FL learn-

ing process. These strategies, which involve thinking about the learning process, mainly incorporate planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Similarly, metacognition can also be defined as “thinking about one’s own thinking”. More importantly, J. Rubin refers to R. Oxford in stating that the conscious use of metacognitive strategies helps learners get their attention back when they lose it [13, p. 200].

In the similar vein, M. Wilt argues that employing metacognitive strategies have such benefits [11, pp. 630–631]:

1. Students’ learning process is faster and they better integrate the incoming information.

2. Students define themselves as constant receivers and have fewer problems when dealing with new and unknown situations.

3. Students attain self-confidence from their cooperation with partners and teachers.

4. There is a possibility for students to trace their success in the LC process, observe and evaluate their improvement.

Equally important are *cognitive strategies*, which help manipulate the material under study or apply a specific technique to the learning task. In particular, these strategies are employed with the aim to understand the linguistic input and obtain the data. The cognitive strategies are combined to comprehend and accumulate the input for later access and retrieval. Cognitive strategies are considered to be problem-solving techniques that learners use in order to deal with learning assignments and make the acquisition of a FL less problematic. For instance, learners sometimes do not know the meanings of words and they try to guess or elicit them from the context. Some more examples of cognitive strategies include repeating to memorize, summarizing, and organizing the details into a coherent whole [12, p. 170].

Another essential technique, a socio-affective strategy, should be contributed to the abovementioned to specify the way of learning that occurs when students actively co-operate with classmates, question the teacher for clarification, or apply specific techniques to lower their anxiety level. That is why it is important to promote positive emotional responses to the learning process. E. Habte-Gabr emphasizes that a socio-affective strategy is non-academic in its nature and implies stimulating learning through building a degree of relations between the lecturer and students. Of great significance is also a learner’s awareness of how to reduce anxiety, feel confident while completing listening tasks, and raise personal motivation in fostering listening abilities [14, p. 15].

Ultimately, some conclusion on listening strategies should be drawn. LC strategies are beneficial since they provide less frustrating

and more reliable ways to successful FL acquisition. Furthermore, metacognitive and cognitive techniques trigger off enhancing students’ mental performance in the process of LC and positively affect its outcomes.

In conclusion, successful LC depends both on recipients (the level of their listening capacity, memory, imagination, attention, background knowledge, and FL experience), and LC conditions (the quality of the recorded text, number of listening sessions, and duration of an audio text). Considering possible difficulties an individual may face during the listening process, it is essential to devise solutions to these problems. Though there is no ideal method that fits all kinds of obstacles hindering LC, diversified types of activities may be implemented. For these reasons, an awareness and employment of effective LC strategies can help students capitalize on the FL input they are receiving. Hence, the benefits from strategies students are likely to acquire in the learning process is the topic for discussion in the studies that may be seen as a perspective for further research.

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ПРОБЛЕМИ ФОРМУВАННЯ АУДИТИВНОЇ КОМПЕТЕНЦІЇ: ТРУДНОЩІ АУДІЮВАННЯ ТА ШЛЯХИ ЇХ ПОДОЛАННЯ

Анотація. Метою статті є висвітлення таких методичних питань, як труднощі аудіювання та ефективні стратегії їх подолання. Зокрема, аналізуються мовні, соціолінгвістичні та соціокультурні труднощі сприйнятої інформації, труднощі, зумовлені умовами аудіювання, особистісними характеристиками мовця і слухача, а також контентом тексту. Серед стратегій, які можуть допомогти студентам подолати означені труднощі, виокремлено метакогнітивні, когнітивні та соціо-афективні плани дій. Ці стратегії мають високий ступінь ефективності під час навчання аудіювання. Підкреслюється думка про те, що проблеми, з якими можуть стикнутись студенти під час сприйняття іноземного тексту, можуть значно загальмувати й уповільнити набуття студентами аудитивної компетенції, тому виникає нагальна потреба розглянути ці проблеми й запропонувати та схарактеризувати стратегії, які сприяють розвитку загальної аудитивної здатності суб'єктів пізнання.

Ефективність запропонованих стратегій, спрямованих на подолання труднощів аудіювання, була перевірена в педагогічному експерименті, адаптованому для студентів, які спеціалізуються в галузі

іноземної середньої освіти. Експериментально доведено, що раціональне поєднання застосовуваних стратегій може допомогти студентам подолати труднощі слухання іноземного тексту і значно поліпшити результати аудіювання. Відповідно, означені стратегії сприяють розвитку аудитивної здатності тих, хто навчається, що є порогом, за яким студент може зрозуміти 75 % прослуханого тексту. Аудитивна здатність часто слугує індикатором здатності слухача розуміти усне мовлення. Вона також є основою для розвитку аудитивної компетенції. Високий рівень аудитивної компетенції залежить від багатьох чинників, серед яких ступінь володіння іноземною мовою і здатність до сприйняття іноземного тексту суб'єктами пізнання, складність сприйнятого тексту та його мовний, соціолінгвістичний і соціокультурний контент, та умови аудіювання.

Ключові слова: аудіювання; аудитивна здатність; аудитивна компетенція; труднощі аудіювання; стратегії слухання.

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