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# Design of Listening Comprehension Activities for Practicing English Language: A Simplified Model for Future Language Teachers

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#### **Abstract**

Listening Comprehension should be considered the key to communication and to learning a foreign language. However, some language teachers have an inadequate development of the listening activities. Our intention in this essay is to provide to the future language teachers as well as to the inexperienced ones, with simple but clear instructions to design an effective and enjoyable listening comprehension class. The activity model has been used by the author in her classes of the course "Design of Listening Comprehension Activities" (Enseñanza de la Expresión Oral y la Comprensión Auditiva – EEOCA) for three years. Model classes designed by the students of the course during the academic period 2022-2 are presented here.

Keywords: Language teaching methodology, listening comprehension skills, lesson planning

# Diseño de actividades de comprensión auditiva para practicar inglés: un modelo simplificado para futuros profesores de lenguas

#### Resumen

La comprensión auditiva debe ser considerada un aspecto clave para la comunicación y el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. Sin embargo, algunos docentes de lenguas desarrollan las actividades de comprensión auditiva de una manera inadecuada. La intención de este ensayo es brindarle a los futuros profesores de lenguas y a todos aquellos que ya tienen experiencia, algunas instrucciones sencillas y claras para diseñar una clase de comprensión auditiva que sea efectiva y que los alumnos disfruten. Este modelo de actividades que se comparte ha sido empleado por la autora en el curso "Enseñanza de la Expresión Oral y la Comprensión Auditiva – EEOCA" por tres años. Se incluyen clases modelo diseñadas por los estudiantes de este curso durante el periodo 2022-2.

Palabras clave: Metodología de la enseñanza de lenguas, habilidades de comprensión auditiva, diseño de planes de clase.

#### Introduction

Teaching requires a well-organized plan: the whole school period, terms, classes and evidently, the activities in the classroom which require a planning process. In the teaching of languages, being English our concern, it is necessary to develop different types of activities for each skill or purpose: listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills; vocabulary or grammar aspects, among others, which must be organized ahead of the class. Depending on the main purpose of the class, one, two or all the previous skills and aspects mentioned may be taken into account for regular practice.

Years ago, listening comprehension (LC) was neglected in the classes, being considered the 'Cinderella Skill' disregarded by its big sister, the speaking skill in language learning (Solak & Altay, 2014). It was considered that during the 80's LC arose as an important skill (Rivers, 1986); years later LC was declared as the most important skill in the process of the learning of a language, being nowadays crucial in language learning (De Andrade, 2006; Yildirim & Yildirim, 2016; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016), the foundation for speaking, writing, and reading (Egamnazarova & Mukhamedova, 2021), and the most frequently used skill in language classrooms (Ferris, 1998; Murphy, 1991; Vogely, 1998; and Hamouda, 2013) because learners listen more than they speak in the classroom (Brown, 2006; Morley in Celce-Murcia, 2000; Rost, 2013). Additionally, through listening exercises, teachers can draw student's attention to new forms of the language (Rost, 1994).

# Definitions of Listening and Listening Comprehension

To define LC could be a little bit challenging since it is difficult to make a clear and quick definition of it (Hichem, 2013) and it is also "complicated and hard to be analyzed" (Ulum, 2015, p. 1). Despite this, we present some definitions that state the notion of the skill.

Purdy (1997) stated that listening is an active process that requires attention, perception, interpretation, remembering and response to the verbal and non-verbal expressed needs of others. For this author, LC encompasses not only communication but also satisfaction of the needs of communication of others. For Teng (1998, p.1), listening is a pedagogical term connected to 'speech recognition', 'speech perception', 'speech understanding' and 'spoken language understanding".



On the other hand, Rost (2002) defined listening as the process of receiving the speaker's input, that helps in the construction and representation of the meaning, the negotiation of that meaning with the speakers and the creation of meaning using the empathy and the imagination.

Helgesen (2003) said that listening is a very active process that requires processing what we listen or hear and combine it with previous information familiar to what is being heard or listened. As a consequence, by means of this active process, we create meaning by integrating what we hear or experience with the data in our minds; this definition guided the work we present.

# How to approach Listening comprehension

Two visions towards how listening comprehension is conceived can be highlighted: the purely linguistic one and the functional one; the early involving the elements of the language and the late, the function of LC in the communication process.

From the linguistic perspective, some authors have approached LC as the process of obtaining the oral input. Nadig (2013) said that listening comprehension encompasses multiple processes that include understanding of spoken language (speech sounds, meaning of individual words, and understanding syntax of sentences) and making sense of it. However, Kim and Pilcher (2016) considered that listening comprehension is one's ability to listen and comprehend spoken language of multiple utterances; they also mentioned that many languages cognitive skills contribute to its development, for example working memory, attention, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, inference, among others.

From the communication process, some authors have approached LC as a functional process. Ur (1984, p. 25) considered that listening comprehension is an "expectations/purposes" process in which "...if we want to know the answer to a question, then we will ask, and expect to hear a relevant response" and the listener will be aware of certain key phrases or words that will provide the clue for the answer. So, if the listener grasps "where", that keyword will be connected to a location. In addition, Abdulrahman, Basalama and Widodo (2018), said that listening is not only a practice that leads to comprehension but also to language learning; moreover, listening is a demanding activity requiring a significant effort, mainly from the teachers, who must design materials to practice the listening skill.



# The Process of Listening Skill

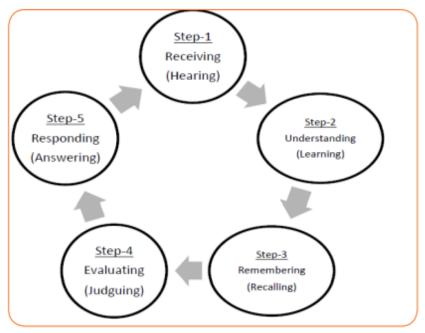
As it was stated previously, LC is a process difficult to explain but there have been some attempts to try to explain how the LC process is developed inside of every human being. Two models to explain the *how* of LC are presented here: the model of Tyagi (2013) and the theory of the Bottom-up and Top down process (Richards, 2003).

# Tyagi's model

Tyagi (2013) described the development of the Listening process through five stages: hearing, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding.

Figure 1.

The Listening Process.



Note. From Tyagi (2013, p.2).

In Figure 1, it is observed that the first step in the process is hearing, which is mainly the perception of the auditory input; the second step is the understanding or comprehension of the perceived symbols; the third step is referred to the connection that we have to perform - auditory stimuli plus information stored in our mind; the fourth step is the evaluation of the evidence gathered by the listener to convey the message; and the fifth stage is the response to the gathered input.



#### Bottom-up and Top-down Processes

Top-down and bottom-up processing are methods used in computing that have been applied to other fields of studies, for example to psychology and linguistics (Rau & Jacobs, 1988). In psychology, Eleanor Gibson developed the theory of bottom-up and Top-down processing. Those two concepts refer to how the brain processes the information delivered by the senses: top down process is the process in which the brain collects the information as a whole and breaks it into pieces; bottom up is the opposite: individual items are collected to form a whole (Sobel, Gerrie, Poole, & Kane, 2007).

In linguistics, the Bottom-up processing refers to the understanding of the message by paying attention to the sounds, word meaning and grammar; and the Top-down processing refers to the understanding of the message using the personal experiences of the listener related to the topic being heard (Gebhard, 2000; Richards, 2003). Being brief, bottom-up processing requires details while top-down processing overall information.

# Theoretical principles to Design the Activities

The research applied in the area of LC has been drawn towards effective teaching strategies for the practice of the skill (Chamot, 2005) because the results of the research has shown that those practices benefit the students (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Most materials used for LC practice include strategies such as: prediction, identification of key words and ignoring irrelevant words, activation of background knowledge and keeping the gist of text in mind while listening (Stephen, 2014).

About this same topic, Helgesen (2003), stated that there are five principles that should be performed in LC activities and those are

- 1. Teaching Bottom-up and Top-down processing
- 2. Teaching about the different types of listening
- 3. Teaching different assignments
- 4. Considering level of difficulty
- 5. Teaching various types of listening processing (guessing, drawing, monitoring, etc.)



However, we might observe that those theoretical principles mentioned above lack the practice of other LC outcomes (listening to instructions, taking note of phone numbers, among others) that are relevant to be practiced. Regarding this issue, Celce-Murcia (2000) proposed six outcomes that cover different LC activities or processes. In her proposal, she presents several activities to practice LC depending on the type of outcome to be practiced.

The listening outcomes establish that there are different reasons why we listen; there are different abilities we need to put into practice in order to understand or "listen efficiently" the oral input; and there are some outcomes that prove that the listening process is being carried out effectively.

The listening outcomes proposed by Celce-Murcia are:

- Outcome #1. Listening and performing actions and operations. In this outcome, actions are the evidence that the audio input is understood.
- Outcome #2. Listening and transferring information. The transference of the information can be from oral to oral or from oral to written.
- Outcome #3. Listening and Solving Problems. Students listen to information that is useful to answer questions or to elaborate questions.
- Outcome #4. Listening, Evaluating, and Manipulating Information. In this outcome, the listener evaluates and/or manipulates the information received in some manner (evaluating, combining or condensing information).
- Outcome #5. Interactive Listening and Speaking: Negotiating Meaning through questioning/answering Routines. Here the focus of the outcome is on both the product of transmitting information and the process of negotiating meaning in interactive reciprocal listener speaker exchanges.
- Outcome #6. Listening for Enjoyment, Pleasure, and Sociability

As observed, listening can be practiced at different levels of difficulty and for different reasons; considering real life, all those different types of listening are required during a complete day.

Celce-Murcia's model has been the one followed to design the activities in the EEOCA classes. We will see in the model activities how they are put into practice in the design of LC activities.



# The parts of the listening class

The most traditional model of an LC class, according to Stephen (ibidem) is made up of the following components: pre-listening activity, extensive listening, pre-set task/questions, extensive listening, review of the task/questions, inference of new vocabulary or examination of functional language.

In the pre-listening stage, the teacher has to prepare students for the material they are going to listen to. The theory of Davenellos (in Lestary, 2019, p. 8) states that "the aim of this stage is to prepare students to a topic grammatically, educationally and psychologically". In this stage it is mandatory "...to explain the topic, the keywords and the structures before" (Lestary, ibidem) and through these elements, make the students aware of the content of the listening material.

In the listening activity, students are expected to complete the activities prepared according to the purpose (dealing with the listening outcome mentioned before), as well as the level of the students (A1, A2, and so forth). Lestary (ibidem) mentions that in this stage students are not expected to understand every word...are more likely to construct clear, accurate meaning as they interpret the speaker's verbal cues. During the listening experience, students verify and revise their predictions. They make interpretations and judgments based on what they know, assessing what more they need to know. (p.8)

This stage could be considered as the core of the listening process. However, a final stage is considered important to solidify the skills of the students.

The post-listening stage is considered by Lestary (2019, p.8) as the stage "to help the students connect with what they heard with their own ideas, experience and encourage interpretive and critical listening and reflective thinking."

Peachey (2019) proposes to include in the LC design process the *framework*. In the framework, the teacher takes into account the purpose of the activity, the content and the aspects to practice.



# Proposed model to Design Listening Comprehension Activities

The model proposed in the LC class was based on Peachey's model (framework, pre-listening, listening and post-listening) as well as on Celce-Murcia listening outcomes proposal.

The framework. This is a preparation step in which the following aspects are considered to design the listening comprehension class:

- 1. The main purpose of the listening activity. The purpose is selected by taking into consideration the listening outcomes.
- 2. The content or topic of the activity. Context is important in a class. Introducing short stories, songs, history and some other topics must be part of the design of the class.
- 3. The aspects to practice (vocabulary, grammar, phonetics, among others). Listening comprehension is the core of the class, but inside that class, elements of the language can be practiced or identified.
- 4. The type of students. Age and level of the students are going to determine the topic, content and level of difficulty of the activity.

# The pre-listening activity

This part of the listening comprehension class is intended to motivate and prepare students for the class, as well as prepare them for the listening activity itself.

Motivate. It is important to motivate students before the listening activity. To select a material that will be found interesting by the students and to design activities that catch their attention; and might arouse motivation.

Contextualize. To use an audio or video for a listening activity is something artificial. In real life, people are surrounded by real input (sounds) but in a class, the audio is presented from nowhere, so, to put students into context, it must be a part of the listening comprehension class. Mention the topic (shopping conversation); the location (a park, a restaurant); people in the audio (a man, a woman). Of course, those details could be omitted if the intention of the listening activity is to identify the context.



Prepare. To check that students already know the vocabulary or expressions that they are going to listen to in the audio is another part of the pre-listening activity. Listening is an activity to "identify" sounds, not to make students "guess".

# The listening activity

This is the part of the process in which the listening outcomes and the activities connected to them are taken into account. Before playing the audio, the general instructions are given: audio or video is going to be played three times (three is the ideal number of repetitions, although less or more times are acceptable). First, students might tune their ears to accents and speed; also, the general content of the audio can be grasped. A question to help them to get a general understanding of the message could be good.

The second time the audio is played, students should start completing the task of the listening: draw, check answers, take notes, etc. One activity that must be avoided is to tell students to write complete sentences because this task takes too much time and they will miss information during the listening.

The third time is usually the moment when students check their answers, which they completed during the second time. Listening in a foreign language is a demanding task; for this reason, it is also advisable to have space between each repetition of the audio. During that space, students could remember what they just listened to and check the answers they were writing.

# The post-listening activities

The post-listening activities can be seen as the "closing" activity after the listening activity. Peachey (2019) says that post-listening activities can be approached as a reaction to the material or as an analysis of the language.

#### As a reaction to the material

When teachers present the material and promote that the students discuss the content of the material, it is considered a reaction to it. Furthermore, if students reuse the material they just listened in a conversation or in a text, that is also considered a reaction to the material.



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# Analysis of language

In this activity, students focus on linguistic features of the text. Verb forms, reuse vocabulary or collocation work can be some of the activities in the analysis of language.

Listening comprehension was considered a passive skill for many years and as such it was very much neglected, causing serious problems in the learning of English. To devote time and effort to design and to use outstanding listening comprehension activities in class will transform the English classrooms into the most enjoyable, creative and productive experience in every school.

The design of the listening comprehension activities is neither challenging nor stressful. The model presented here to design those activities (framework design, pre-listening activities, listening activities and post-listening activities) as well as the listening outcomes proposed by Celce-Murcia will make the process of creation of the class very approachable for the language students.

After all the theoretical foundation provided, it is necessary to present some sample listening comprehension activities in order to put the usefulness of the listening outcomes, theories, etc., into a real context. The following activities were designed by the students of the course Teaching of the Oral Expression and Listening Comprehension (Enseñanza de la Expressión Oral y la Comprensión Auditiva – EEOCA), 2022-2 term.

It was required that the students identified the design providing the following information:

- Level the activity was intended for: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1
- Age: pre-school, elementary, teenagers, young adults, adults.
- Content: students had to identify the vocabulary, grammatical structures, expressions that were going to be practiced.
- Type of listening outcome: They had to define the expected outcome they pursued with the activity.



# Sample Activities

# Activity 1

Authors: Amador and Díaz

Level: Intermediate/ Advance.

Age: young adults.

#### Content:

- a) -Suggestions.
- b) -Vocabulary.
- c) -Tense.
- d) -3rd conditional.
- e) -Situations.
- f) -Speaking.

Type of listening Outcome #3; Listen to a very short situation in which students propose their solutions or give suggestions to solve a problem.

# Pre-listening activity

Elicitation:

Who has a smartphone or laptop?

Who shares their smartphone?

Who shares their laptop?

Have you ever had a bad experience sharing any of your devices?

Do you know someone who does share their phone or computer?

# Listening activity

The students will listen to a short audio about cyber-hacking and internet security.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=851 IBQ vhh8



During the listening of the video, the students will answer the following questions:

1- Which electronics have the hardware to be turned into a spying device?

A) Computer B) Mobile phone C) Video game console

2- Since when have malicious hackers been trying to control our computers or smartphones?

A) 1997 B) 1970 C) 1984

3- What is the name of malicious software?

A) Hackware B) Trojanware C) Malware

4- What are some of the most common uses of this software?

5- How can you double-check an email before opening it?

Answer true or false to the following sentence.

6- USBs, thunderolt cables, CDs, and DVDs cannot infect a computer.

A) True B) False

The video will be repeated if necessary.

#### Post listening activity

The teacher will hand out yellow slips of paper in sets of 5, each set has the same number written on it (or letters if you prefer) and enough sets to cover all the students in the class; for example, if there are 20 students in the class, there will be 4 sets. The class is divided into groups according to the number (or letter) written on their respective yellow slips of paper. The teacher then outlines a situation to each group to be discussed among the group as illustrated below.

#### Situations

1. Irene shares her smartphone with her younger brother so he can play Fortnite on it, but yesterday she found that her little brother bought V-Bucks (money that can be used only in the videogame) without her consent and she can't ask for a refund for the purchase.



- 2. Maria was showing one of her not-so-close friends, Jessi, the photos she took last weekend at the beach, on her smartphone. When Jessi returned her smartphone, Maria realized that Jessi had checked her private conversations on Messenger and WhatsApp.
- 3. Kai and Jennie have known each other for half a year and started dating one month ago. Last week they both shared their smartphone passwords, but Kai noticed that Jennie chats with his friends impersonating him, behind his back, to determine what he tells them about her.
- 4. Christopher shares his laptop with his little brother so he can do his homework, when he opened the browser, he realized that it had permission to use his camera. He asked his little brother if he knew anything about it, and he told him that, "A website asked for permission to let him see the information he needed."
- 5. Felix had an essay to print for his first class of the day so he went to his school stationery store, logged into his Google Drive account, and printed his work, but he forgot to delete his account from the computer. Arriving home in the afternoon, he found that all his documents had been deleted from his Google Drive.
- 6. Peter's laptop was stolen yesterday, in it he had all his private files and important notes, including the passwords of all his accounts, so when he wanted to access his email and social networks, they sent him a message telling him that the password had been changed.

Then have the students discuss these questions:

- What do you think about it?
- Has this ever happened to you?
- What did the person do wrong?
- What tips/suggestions would you give them?



# Activity 2

Authors: Gonzalez and Escalante

Identify the level: Intermediate (B1-B2) - Middle School

The age: Teenagers

Content: Students will receive information and pictures related to holidays, festivities, and traditions and they will get the opportunity to share their experiences with each other. They will discuss the difference between these terms and argue which celebrations are holidays, traditions, or festivities, maintaining a participative and respectful demeanor.

Vocabulary: holiday, traditions, festivities, celebrations, feast, culture, society.

Type of listening: Listening and transferring information.

# Pre-listening activity

The students listen to the information given by the teachers about the topic of Holidays and discuss their understanding of them. They will look at the pictures on the slides and talk about their favorite or least favorite celebrations.

Figure 2
Sample slide 1





Figure 3
Sample slide 2



# Listening activity

The students will listen to an audio about New Year's Traditions, and they will fill out a worksheet.

#### NEW YEAR TRADITIONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

- 1. When and where did the Polar Bear Swim tradition start?
  - a. Russia, 1920
  - b. Canada, 1920
  - c. Panama, 1930
- 2. What do people do during the Polar Bear Swim?
  - a. Jump into freezing water.
  - b. Jump into freezing water and try to catch fish with their mouths or hands.
  - c. Dress up in white furry outfits and swim in pools.



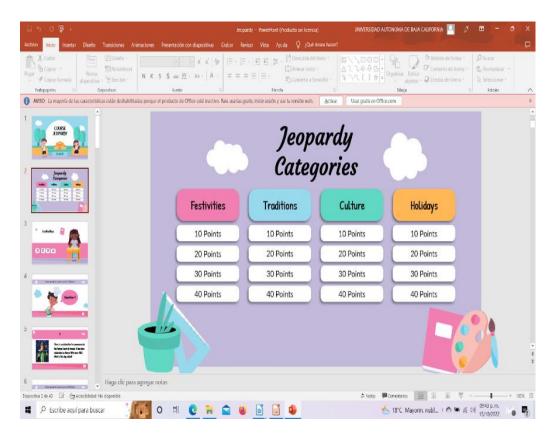
What does a midnight kiss mean for people in England?	
a. Luck for getting married next year.	
b. Luck and prosperity for the coming year.	
c. Set the tone of your relationship for the coming year.	
When and where did the New Year Ball Drop originated?	
a. England, 1987	
b. United States, 1987	
c. United States, 1907	
At what times does the ball drop?	
a. 11:59 PM	
b. 12:00 AM	
c. 12:00 PM	
In, women place under their	
In, people bang against the walls to	
"First Footing" is a New Year's tradition practiced in  fter they finish, they will compare their answers as a group and correct their mistakes (if any	7).
, , ,	/



# Post listening activity

The students will play a game of Jeopardy about the different types of holidays, festivities, and traditions, and get to know more about them as they play.

Figure4
Sample slide post listening



(The slides have a link that connect questions and answers in a dynamic way)

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81