Pre-listening Stage and Teaching Listening from the Adult Learner's Perspective

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of Communicative Language Teaching (approx. the late 1970s) we have taken for granted that teaching listening comprehension should be an integral part of every general English course and that a listening session in the classroom should consist of three stages: 1. pre-listening, 2. while-listening and 3. post-listening (e.g. Anderson and Lynch 1988: 58; Underwood 1989: 28; Hedge 2000: 249; Field 2008: 17). However, how often do we teach listening specifically? And do we understand what we do? Do we know what exactly happens in each stage? What is the relative proportion of each of the stages? What do we do in the pre-listening stage? Is the pre-listening stage useful for all proficiency levels? Should we use the same pre-listening techniques for higher and lower proficiency levels? How many times do we repeat (replay) one listening text?

These are some of the questions which had been running through our minds for some time and so we decided to ask the students in our face-to-face courses in the Department of Language Studies about their experiences, opinions and attitudes to teaching/learning listening, with a focus on the pre-listening stage. In this paper, we would like to share some of the results.

After introducing the methods in Section II, the results and discussion in Section III will cover the following topics: 1. Students' self-evaluation in the main language skills and language systems, 2. Needs analysis, 3. Teaching and learning listening in the language classroom in general, and 4. The pre-listening stage in the listening session. Section IV attempts to draw conclusions for both teaching listening and using pre-listening techniques in the classroom, with a special focus on lower proficiency levels.

2. Methods

The purpose of the research project was to find out how listening is taught in the adult language classroom and learn more about our adult students' needs and opinions. The character of the quantitative research was mainly descriptive.

The questionnaire survey was carried out at the Department of Language Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (ASCR), where we teach mainly PhD students and employees of the ASCR (age: 21-73, mean age: 39). We teach six foreign languages, among which English dominates with approx. 72% of our students, French covers approx. 13%, German approx. 12%, and Spanish approx. 3%. We offer courses at all levels (CEF A1-C2). One third of our courses is taught by native speaker teachers. As far as English is concerned, in summer term 2012, there were 42 courses of general English, 19 exam preparation courses, and 12 conversation courses.

In the period between October 2011 and April 2012, a questionnaire was developed in order to collect data from our students about their opinions, needs, experiences, and feelings about learning listening in the classroom.

The questionnaire survey was carried out in the period between May 9 and June 1, 2012. In cooperation with the IT department, an online version of the questionnaire was prepared and piloted. The purpose of the survey was explained in advance firstly by the department teachers in their courses and secondly in the introduction to the online questionnaire. The link to the online questionnaire was sent to all our students of face-to-face courses (1,016 students) via email [1]. The questionnaire was anonymous and the students received two more reminders via email. In order to ensure a high response rate, proactive contact strategy was adopted (Vicente and Reis 2010). The survey took three weeks.

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to answer 47 questions with their foreign language (FL) course in mind. Most of the courses have just one teacher. The students attending courses shared by two teachers (Cambridge exam preparation, e.g. PET / FCE / CAE / CPE) were given the instruction to choose just one of their teachers and answer the questionnaire with that particular teacher and course in mind. Nevertheless, there was also an option to fill in the questionnaire twice, separately for each teacher.

The response rate was 47%, which may be considered very high given the fact that it was an online survey (Gavora 2010: 134). We received 473 replies in total [2], out of which 374 (i.e. 79%) were responses from students of English as a foreign language (EFL).

The SPSS software was employed to analyse the collected data, firstly for the whole sample and secondly for the EFL students sample. There were hardly any differences between the results from the two samples. This paper concentrates solely on the results from the EFL students sample (see Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Sample Description

	Men			Women			
Gender	27 %			73 %			
	21 - 27	**28 - 34**	**35 - 41**	**42 - 48**	**49 - 55**	**56 - 62**	**63 and more**
Age group	27 %	21 %	13 %	11 %	14 %	10 %	4 %
	Ph.D.	**MA**		**BA**	**Higher Edu.**	**Secondary school**	
Education	21 %	57 %		5 %	2 %	15 %	
	A1	**A2**		**B1**	**B2**	**C**	
Proficiency level	4 %	22 %		18 %	37 %	19	

3. Results and discussion

Statistical analyses of the data revealed a lot of notable results we would like to comment on:

1. Self-evaluation: How students assess themselves in the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and language systems (grammar, lexis, spelling, pronunciation, and communicative language functions) [Q4-5]:

The learners graded their own language skills on the scale from 1 to 5, as if in school (Czech grading system: 1 – the best grade, 5 – the worst grade). Speaking and listening, the skills of oral communication, obtained the worst results (average grade: mean 2.78 in speaking and 2.77 in listening), whereas the students' reading skill obtained the best grade (mean: 1.92). As for the levels, the higher the level, the higher the students' self-assessment of their listening skills (contingency coefficient: 0.342). The best mark was given at A1 level in 0% cases and at C level in 16%, whereas the worst marks surprisingly reached their peak at B1 level. One reason might be that B1 students, when preparing for the FCE exam, are more critical and realise better than at lower levels the key role of listening in communication (affecting both the Listening and Speaking parts of the exam). On the other hand, in the students' assessment of their language systems (knowledge), there were only slight differences, with lexical knowledge scoring the worst (mean: 2.60) and pronunciation scoring the best (mean: 2.38). Overall, however, the students assessed all their language systems (knowledge) higher than their speaking and listening skills.

Conclusion: Listening is as important as speaking and deserves our attention (especially at lower levels, see below). This is also supported by the fact that 63% of the learners stated that one of their primary purposes of language study is 'communication when travelling' [Q46].

2. Needs analysis: Which language skill(s) and knowledge students need to improve most [Q6-7]:

The respondents could choose a maximum of two language skills and two language systems they want to improve most. In agreement with the previous issue (point 1, [Q 4-5]) the learners stated that they most want to improve speaking (91%) and listening (55%), the skills they assessed as their worst. Nearly half of the students chose the combination of 'speaking and listening' (49%). Concerning the language systems, they would like to improve mainly communicative language functions (69%) and lexis (54%). These results confirm our previous research results

(Ždímalová 2009a: 9, a questionnaire survey on 100 adult students from the Czech Technical University Language Department), where the students identified speaking skills and knowledge of lexis as their priorities for improvement. The fact that adult students crave improvement mainly in speaking is also consistent with other researchers' findings (e.g. Richards 2009). Furthermore, it may be supported by the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (Swain 2000: 97-114; Rost 2002: 94) which says that students best improve their communicative competence in the foreign/second language via using the language in speaking.

Conclusion: The students' need to improve firstly speaking and secondly listening is most probably based on the students' lack of communicative competence in the two oral communication skills (see point 1, [Q4] above), and on the students' beliefs that they can best improve their communicative competence by speaking. For the above mentioned reasons it is vital to **integrate speaking and listening** in the listening session, as sometimes mentioned elsewhere (e.g. Hinkel 2006; Lynch 2009: 110; Vandergrift 2007: 205), so that we maximize the Students' Talking Time (STT) in the classroom (Scrivener 1994: 14).

3. *Teaching/learning listening in the language classroom [Q10, 18, 21, 15-16, 12-13]:*

- **A) How students evaluate the quality of teaching listening** [Q10]: The learners evaluated the quality of their teachers' teaching in the course in three areas, 1. teaching in general [Q9], 2. teaching listening [Q10], and 3. teaching speaking [Q11], by assigning grades on the scale from 1 to 5 (as if in school). Teaching listening obtained the worst evaluation (mean: 1.82), closely followed by teaching speaking (mean: 1.77), whereas the quality of the teachers' teaching in general obtained the best grade (mean: 1.53).
- In the evaluation of the quality of teaching listening the respondents used all the grades on the scale and, according to the results, three distinct groups can be identified: excellent teachers (grade "1": 41%), very good teachers (grade "2": 41%) and teachers that may need to improve their teaching of listening (grades "3/4/5": 18%). This issue will be analysed further in our research project in the near future and predictors will be identified for the successful

(high-quality) teaching of listening from the students' point of view. So far, we can draw the following conclusions.

- As far as levels are concerned, the average mark was between 1.65 (given by C level students) and 2.08 (given by A1 students). However, the 0.43 difference in evaluation of the teachers' quality of teaching listening may not be considered significant in the light of the fact that at C level students are said to have the listening skill automatized (e.g. Rost 2002: 110; Field 2008: 213) and that they do not need to focus on practising listening as much as the lower levels.

- In terms of **mode of interaction in the classroom** [Q20], the most frequently used variants are:

- 1. '*Students work individually, the teacher asks for the answers and then the whole class discusses them.*' – 54% of the learners. [Q10: average mark: mean: 1.83].

- 2. '*Students work in pairs: they discuss possible answers. The teacher asks the pairs for their solutions and then the whole class discusses whose answer/solution is the best.*' – 22% of the learners. [Q10: average mark: mean: 1.70].

- 3. '*Students work in pairs: they discuss possible answers. The teacher asks the pairs for their solutions and then the teacher supplies the answers.*' – 17% of the learners. [Q10: average mark: mean: 1.98].

- We can qualitatively compare only these three variants as the other ones had very low N values (N<10). Out of the three variants, the teachers were evaluated best when using the following mode of interaction: '*Students work in pairs: they discuss possible answers. The teacher asks the pairs for their solutions and then the whole class discusses whose answer/solution is the best.*' This applies to all levels, and teachers who use mainly the above mentioned mode of interaction received an average mark of 1.7. On the other hand, interaction that includes groups of 3-4 students may be considered less effective by students as the average mark in Q10 is 2.00. These results confirm that students would welcome Field's proposal of lower teacher engagement and higher learner interaction when teaching listening (Field 2008: 44).

Conclusion: There are definitely things we can improve in our teaching of listening, e.g. facilitating pair work and discussion of answers according to Field (2008: 45) or Vandergrift (2007: 199), ensuring lower teacher intervention and higher learner interaction (e.g. Scrivener 2012), and offering learners more variety (see below).

- **B) Types of listening used in the classroom and percentage of time devoted to them** [Q18]: On average, the teaching of listening in our courses consists mainly of the following types of listening:
- 1. Listening to audiorecordings from the course textbook or supplementary textbooks: 65% of the time.
- 2. Listening to songs with a focus on their lyrics: 7% of the time.
- 3. Listening to authentic recordings of native speakers (e.g. from You Tube): 7% of the time.
- 4. Listening while viewing the course DVD/video: 6% of the time.
- 5. Listening to the teacher reading a text: 5% of the time, etc.
- The remaining 10% are distributed among the other types, which all received a mean figure only between 0 - 4% of the time.

Most of the learners answered that their teachers use several different types of listening. However, 26% stated that their teachers use listening to 'course/textbook' audiorecordings 100% of the time. In those cases, such listening to audiorecordings seems to be overused at the expense of the other types (e.g. video), and some authors warn us about this kind of danger (e.g. Field 2008: 58-9; Rost 2002: 105). Analysis of Q10 shows that the more listening to 'course/textbook' audiorecordings prevails, the worse evaluation the teachers get in Q10.

Conclusion: The results confirmed that listening to 'textbook' audiorecordings forms the largest proportion in the teaching of listening, and at the same time that there are considerable differences among the teachers. Students evaluate better the teachers who use a variety of listening types and media in the classroom.

- **C) Types of listening that students would like to do more often in the classroom** [Q21]: The students lack the following types of listening, with the

percentage meaning how many students would prefer more frequent class use of the particular types (Students could choose max. five top options):

- 1. Listening to authentic recordings of native speakers (e.g. from You Tube): 42% of the learners.
- 2. Listening while viewing original films/DVDs/videos: 34% of the learners.
- 3. Listening while viewing the course DVD/video: 27% of the learners.
- 4. Listening to songs with a focus on their lyrics: 26% of the learners.
- 5.-6. Listening to audiorecordings from the course textbook or supplementary textbooks: 24% of the learners.
- 5.-6. Listening while viewing a foreign language TV channel: 24% of the learners.

Conclusions:

Based on the analysis of Q21, it is possible to draw conclusions that apply to all proficiency levels.

The variety principle: It is obvious that the students' preferences and tastes vary as the range of the types they lack [Q21] is much wider than the types we use most often in the classroom ([Q18], see point B above). This may have many reasons; mainly that variety is the spice of the classroom (Field 2008: 58) and that students differ not only in their personalities but also in their learning styles (e.g. Reid 1997, see Q41 below).

The authenticity principle: The students would like their teachers to use authentic listening texts (mainly authentic recordings of native speakers, original films/DVDs/videos, and listening to songs) more often. Authentic texts are very useful (e.g. Rost 2002: 125; Vandergrift 2007: 200) and this applies even to the lower-proficiency levels (Field 2008: 277; Choděra 2006: 142).

The visual support principle: The learners prefer those types of listening which involve visual support, e.g. viewing films/DVDs/videos or a TV channel. It is much better if listeners can connect with the speaker by seeing him/her (e.g. Riley 1981: 145; Lynch 2009: 19), not only for 'lip-reading', but also for understanding the context of the whole situation and the nature of the communicative language

functions involved in the encounter. The results also correspond to the distribution of learning styles (visual/auditory/kinaesthetic) among learners, where the visual learning style is usually the most predominant. In our sample 59% of the learners prefer the visual learning style [Q41]. Instruction based on preferred learning styles of learners is likely to be more effective (e.g. Gardner 1993; Reid 1997; Rost 2002: 105).

- **D) The time spent on teaching/learning listening in the classroom vs. what percentage would be ideal from the students' point of view** [Q15-16]: On average, the learners stated that 23% of the class time is spent on the teaching of listening, whereas they think that 30% of the time should be devoted to it. The comparison of levels shows that the main dissatisfaction is at levels A2 and B1 where the learners wish to increase the percentage by 7% and 9% respectively.

Conclusion: The results confirm that from the students' point of view listening in the classroom deserves more attention, especially at lower-proficiency levels, and that teachers should reserve more time for a systematic listening instruction, which is in agreement with the current literature on the teaching of listening comprehension, e.g. Rost (2002), Field (2008), Lynch (2009), and Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010).

- **E) Use of students' mother tongue (L1) as a means of communication in the classroom vs. how much students want to use it** [Q12-13]: The percentage in answers to both questions strongly correlates with the proficiency level. In the whole sample, L1 is used on average 18% of the time and the students would like it to be used 11% of the time. The learners' answers vary a lot, especially concerning the reality in the classroom.
- The highest-proficiency students (at C level) seem to be very satisfied; they have 7% and they want 5%. However, the lower the level the more dissatisfied the students, e.g. the B1 students have on average 22% and would like only 11%, the A2 students get 30% but want only 20%, and the A1 students have 47 % and want 29%. Based on the differences between the mean figures, we

can see that mainly the lowest-proficiency students would like L1 to be used in the classroom less than it is in fact used.

- As far as age is concerned, the younger the students the less time they want L1 to be used in the classroom. The main reason is that younger students have been exposed to English much more intensively than the previous generations because of the focus on oral communication in Communicative Language Teaching (Richards and Rodgers 2001) and globalization in general, including opportunities for travelling and other effects of the post-revolution era in the Czech Republic.

Conclusion: The higher the level, the less L1 is used as a means of communication in the classroom and the less the students want L1 to be used. In general, higher-level students are more satisfied, and it is fair to mention that they often have native-speaker teachers. The teachers of lower levels should attempt to use L1 as a means of communication in the classroom less often than they do.

F) How many times students listen to one listening text [Q19, Q33k]: In the ELT literature, recommendations vary as to whether the listening text should be repeated or not and how many replays there should be. Authors usually suggest two (e.g. Elkhafaiti 2005: 505) or three replays (e.g. Vandergrift (2003: 433; 2007: 199), but Field (2008: 45) proposes even five replays of the same text. It is no wonder that the students' answers range from 1 to 5 replays because the teachers' approach to this issue naturally varies too. On average, one listening text is played 2.3 times (median: 2 times), with 62% of the 'twice' answer and 31% of the 'three times' answer. Interestingly, in another question on students' problems with listening to audiorecordings, 24% of our students stated that it is '*not sufficient for them to listen to the text twice*' [Q33k]. These results are in agreement with pedagogical steps suggested by Vandergrift (2007: 199), in which prediction stage is followed by three verification stages.

Conclusion: In general it can be said that our teachers play one listening text two or three times and the majority of the students consider it sufficient. One fourth of the students would prefer to listen to one text more than two times. Ideally, we

can provide such students with listening for HW in order for them to listen to it as many times as they need. In fact, 14% of our learners stated that they listen to '*listening HW set up by their teachers*' [Q36b].

4. Pre-listening stage in the listening session [Q28, 24, 26-27, 23-29]:

A) **Usefulness of the inclusion of pre-listening techniques in the pre-listening stage** [Q28]: Many teachers consider the pre-listening stage useful (e.g. Elkhafaifi 2005, Ždímalová 2009b), but what does the survey tell us about the students' opinions on this issue? A large majority (89 %) of the learners approve of the inclusion of pre-listening techniques, with 58% considering the pre-listening techniques 'definitely useful', 31% 'rather useful', 4% 'rather useless', 1% 'definitely useless', and 6% stating that they 'do not know'. Not surprisingly, among the few learners (5%) who do not find pre-listening techniques useful were mainly young learners (age 20-27) from high-proficiency levels (B2-C) who are generally better at listening and do not consider it their priority for improvement (their priority being mainly 'speaking' or a combination of 'speaking and writing').

Conclusion: Based on the data, the inclusion of pre-listening techniques proved to be highly relevant to our students at all proficiency levels.

B) **Students' evaluation of how well their teachers can use pre-listening techniques** (in the classroom) [Q24]: This evaluation strongly correlates (correlation coefficient: 0.54) with the students' evaluation of their teachers' teaching of listening [Q10] (see point 3.A above). Most students think that their teachers are able to use pre-listening techniques very well (average mark: mean: 1.76). Only 3% of the students gave the worst two marks (marks 4 or 5, in the Czech marking system). This negative evaluation is dispersed across all proficiency levels.

Conclusion: Teachers who can use pre-listening techniques effectively are in most cases also considered very good teachers of listening. The worse teachers

can use pre-listening techniques, the worse they are evaluated in the quality of teaching listening. Of course, the question remains whether and how accurately students can judge such features of our teaching.

C) **How often the pre-listening techniques are included: reality in the classroom vs. students' preferences** [Q26-27]: The results show that pre-listening techniques are applied before the majority of listening texts; on average in 70% of all listening texts (median 80%). Surprisingly, at higher levels the pre-listening techniques seem to be used more often (e.g. in 87% at C level) than at lower levels, the worst result being at A2 level: in 63% of all listening texts. We expected this to be just the other way round; given the automaticity of listening skill at higher levels (e.g. Rost 2002: 110; Field 2008: 213) we assumed that at higher levels there is less need for pre-listening techniques than at lower levels. Do our research results mean that pre-listening techniques are really used more often at higher levels or may the results mean that students just interpret the reality in the classroom this way? If pre-listening techniques are really used more often at higher levels, why is it so? One reason might be that at higher levels students are more experienced language learners and demand pre-listening techniques as effective tools for preparation; a completely different reason might be that higher levels usually have better qualified teachers, who may tend to use pre-listening techniques more often. Perhaps a further reason for the higher prevalence of pre-listening activities at higher levels might be exam classes and the importance of listening exam paper strategies. Nevertheless, the first author of the article teaches lower-proficiency students and attempts to use pre-listening techniques in 100% of cases. Based on her teaching experience, we are inclined to believe that the differences between lower and higher levels are mainly caused by the fact that lower-proficiency students (A1-A2) underestimate the reality in the classroom (the amount of percent) because they do not feel adequately prepared for listening and do not succeed in listening the way they would wish to. Therefore, it is more useful to compare students' answers in Q26 and Q27 and study whether and how much the learners wish to increase the use of pre-listening techniques at different levels. The results show that lower-level students want to increase the frequency of

using pre-listening techniques much more than higher-level students, e.g. A2 and B1 students by 8%, and C students, on the other hand, seem to be satisfied with what they are getting (mean: 80%) and want slightly less (-1%).

Conclusion: In general, pre-listening techniques are used quite often, on average in 70% (mean) of all listening texts (median 80%). Lower-proficiency learners are less satisfied with the frequency of using pre-listening techniques than higher-proficiency learners, and want to increase it by 8%, whereas higher-proficiency learners want the same frequency as they are getting (mean: 80%) or slightly lower (-1%).

D) Pre-listening techniques used most often [Q23] **vs. pre-listening techniques considered the most effective** [Q29]: According to our learners, the most often used techniques are:
1. pre-teaching key words (66% of the learners);
2. free conversation on the topic of the listening text (55% of the learners);
3. picture description and discussion on the topic (42% of the learners);
4. story prediction based on the pictures (38% of the learners);
5. brainstorming topical lexis (35% of the learners).

In the students' evaluation of the most effective techniques, 'pre-teaching key words' keeps the first position (75% of the learners), whereas the second position is occupied by 'brainstorming topical lexis' (58% of the learners), which obtained the highest value gain across all proficiency levels.

Conclusion: The students definitely consider the most effective those pre-listening techniques that focus on the development of lexis, which is in agreement with the needs analysis results (see point 2 above).

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the 2012 online questionnaire survey, it can be concluded that teaching listening is as important as teaching speaking and deserves our

attention. The learners stated that their priority is to improve mainly speaking and listening. Concerning the listening types, the students would prefer more frequent class use of authentic listening texts and 'visual' types of listening (films, DVDs), which would ensure more variety in the listening sessions. In general, learners would also like to limit the use of L1 as a means of communication in the classroom, especially at lower-proficiency levels. As for the number of 'multiple replays' of one listening text, the learners are satisfied with two to three replays.

As far as pre-listening techniques are concerned, their inclusion is considered useful by the majority of learners. In the evaluation of the quality of teaching listening, the students evaluate higher the teachers who are able to use pre-listening techniques more effectively. On average, pre-listening techniques are used in 70% of all listening texts. At lower levels pre-listening techniques seem to be underused, whereas at higher levels the students are satisfied. The learners across all levels view as the most effective those pre-listening techniques that focus on lexis, namely 'brainstorming topical lexis' and 'pre-teaching key words'.

5. Funding

Notes

[1] We used a complete coverage of the wide-ranging census according to Ryšavý [2011: 89] who says: "If there are good reasons to suppose that the investigated population uses the Internet and communication via email frequently, then nothing prevents the researchers from approaching the whole target population via the Internet".

[2] Unfortunately, in our case it is not possible to describe non-response rate in more detail and to distinguish contact rate from cooperation rate, mainly because of financial and organizational reasons. Therefore, in the analysis we are working with our group of respondents appropriately as with a countable population which has its own statistical limitation as for statistical induction.

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