Effective Learning Tasks and Activities to Improve EFL Listening Comprehension

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Listening comprehension is an integrative and creative process of interaction through which listeners receive speakers' production of linguistic or non-linguistic knowledge. Compared with reading comprehension, it may arouse difficulties and thus impose more burdens on foreign learners. The Audio-Lingual Method focused primarily on speaking. Mimicry, repetition, rote memory, and transformation drills actually interfered with listening comprehension. So learners lost interest and were not highly motivated. Improving listening comprehension requires continual attentiveness and interest. Listening skill can be extended systematically only when students are frequently exposed to a wide range of listening materials with an affective, cultural, social, and psycholinguistic approach. Therefore, teachers should help students learn how to comprehend intactly the overall meaning of intended messages. The literature on teaching listening skill suggests various useful activities: TPR, dictation, role playing, singing, picture recognition, completion, prediction, seeking specific information, summarizing, labeling, humor, jokes, cartoons, media, and so on. Practical classroom teaching necessitates a systematic procedure in which students should take part in meaningful tasks/activities. In addition to this, learners must practice listening comprehension through a self-study process.

Ⅰ. INTRODUCTION

In terms of linguistics, as language is generally referred to as a system of communication which uses the arbitrary symbols of speech sounds, the purpose of language lies in communicative acts (Finocchiaro, 1964; Pei, 1966; Wardhaugh, 1972). Although communication requires both receptive skills(listening and reading) and productive skills(speaking and writing), the former should be given a priority rather than the latter, and in particular it is widely held that the first priority should be placed on listening comprehension among four kinds of language skills above (Brown, 1987). According to the Input Hypothesis claimed by Krashen and Terrell (1983), the best way to improve speaking ability is listening practice, and later on the learner's fluency comes automatically. Postovsky (1974) argues that as intensive oral practices in the learner's initial stage show low efficiency, utterances should be postponed until when listening comprehension is acquired. Asher (1969) also indicates that speaking practice together with listening at the beginning of language learning is detrimental to the improvement of listening skills due to oral drills, and listening comprehension has a transfer effect on speaking ability. In line with this, Rivers (1981) also holds that effective listening practice leads to natural oral proficiency and it may be readily transferred to reading and writing skills. Cha (1991) regards decreased listening skills as the negative effect of audiolingual method on listening comprehension. Paulston and Bruder (1976) claims that classroom instruction should be implemented through mechanical, meaningful, communicative drills, and finally a variety of interpersonal activities. This implies a good method for the learner to increase his listening comprehension by supplementing the reverse effects arising from the mechanical drills of audiolingual method.

In respect of national reality, the wide-ranged international relations

and communication calls for a good command of foreign languages, particularly English as a predominant language spoken all over the world. The sixth national curriculum has reconstructed the goal of English education from linguistic competence with emphasis on accuracy to communicative proficiency based on fluency and authenticity. However, there have been a great deal of hardships and handicaps in the application of listening-oriented teaching methods for communication to classroom instruction activities. These difficulties have derived from deviated secondary education for college entrance, English teacher's inadequate proficiency, a lack of teaching facilities and materials, under-developed instruction programs, and others. In this respect, even though English education in high schools should meet both academic and practical purposes, it is doubtful how much listening-oriented instruction can have a transfer effect on speaking, reading and writing skills. This is one of significant problems which should be tackled. Accordingly, by stepping out of mechanical drills in audiolingual method, this study intends to demonstrate an effective approach to language teaching through a 'Synthetic Approach'[1] and Task-based Meaningful Listening, which is expected to promote listening comprehension and to have a positive influence on other skills — speaking, reading and writing. In addition, on the basis of two important domains of learning — cognitive and affective aspects, this study also presents a teaching method suitable to the learner's ability and his learning situation. This method will assist

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1) A 'Synthetic Approach' has the meaning of viewing methodology as a whole. As Larsen-Freeman (1987) suggests, it consists of three basic triangles such as learner, teacher, and language/culture. In this approach the best adoption or adaptation in a series of teaching procedures can be applied to learning situations in order to facilitate students to improve their communicative proficiency. Thus, this approach uses an eclectic method based on the principle that more effective teaching methodology must be presented considering the essential aspects like teaching goals, students, teachers, materials, situation, etc. (Im, 1999).

students in actively joining classroom activities with highly motivated attitudes and listening-loaded instruction techniques which can help students maintain potent expectation and stability by alleviating their psychological anxiety and stress related to language learning.

II. PROBLEMS OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Taking into account the possibility that the learner may listen to a foreign language with his uniquely framed background knowledge in personal, cultural, educational and linguistic traditions, Underwood (1993, pp.16~19) suggests the careful selection of listening materials and activities, and points out the following problems:

(1) The listener cannot control how fast the speaker should talk.
(2) The listener cannot have the speaker repeat his utterances that the listener failed to understand in real-time situations other than classrooms.
(3) The listener's limited vocabulary becomes obstacles to listening comprehension as the choice of vocabulary depends on the speaker.
(4) The barriers to listening comprehension take place when the listener can not recognize the signals of the language used during the speaker's utterances.
(5) The problem of interpretation takes place from cultural differences and the gaps between pragmatic meaning and semantic meaning.
(6) The transmission of meaning is interrupted when the listener cannot concentrate on what the speaker says.
(7) The inappropriate learning habits impede listening comprehension.

According to Kim (1989, p.4), the problems of listening comprehension are divided into extrinsic and intrinsic factors in its processes. The

extrinsic factors are said to be the listener's psychological and physical state and the natural surroundings in which the listener is placed. The intrinsic factors cover a total of seven stages: (1) the acoustic senses in the flow of speech sounds are not good enough and noise is being made around; (2) mental concentration and attention are impeded; (3) the listener cannot apply his phonological knowledge to listening comprehension properly when the flow of speech sounds is perceived with individual words as independent units, and when there are differences between auditory images formed by the listener and those transmitted by the native speaker's pronunciation; (4) the listener falls short of his syntactic knowledge in accepting individual words as sense groups; (5) the listener falls short of his grammatical knowledge and fails his auditory perception in expanding contents recognized by sense groups to the level of phrases and the sentence; (6) the listener fails to call on his comprehensive knowledge in recognizing the speaker's intended messages on the basis of linguistic and schematic knowledge; and (7) the listener fails to reconstruct axiomatic messages for his long-term memory.

Cha (1991, p.69) considers the following examples as proactive inhibitions in listening comprehension: (1) the listener feels the speed of speaking is too fast, and encounters unfamiliar words, pronunciation and sentence patterns; (2) the listener is not familiar with sound-combination, linked sounds, stress and intonation patterns, idiomatic, humorous and slang expressions, colloquial pronunciation and spelling, omitted words or weakened pronunciation; (3) the listener falls short of abilities for neglecting or skipping trivial elements in order to understand sentences or utterances efficiently.

Suh (1988) states that one of the most difficult problems in listening comprehension is to catch on the speaker's intended message from the flow of unclear speech sounds. This means that such variations as schwa, contractions, omissions, and assimilation constitute those handicaps. With

respect to syntax, in everyday communication the interlocutor often encounters utterances which do not correspond to grammatical rules. The listener has difficulty in making out English utterances, which characterize rhythm in colloquial expressions so that unstressed syllables are attenuated by stressed syllables. Finally, in respect of psychological factors, the listener should be able to comprehend the speaker's intentions through the abstraction of important messages from the whole utterances.

As discussed so far, the factors which determine listening comprehension may be summarized as follows:

(1) the listener's psychological and physical state, and natural surroundings
(2) the phonological and phonetic comprehensibility
(3) the ability to control the speed of utterances
(4) the level of word power
(5) the degree of mental attention and concentration
(6) the ability for perception based on sense groups
(7) the level of syntactic knowledge
(8) the level of background knowledge and the degree of cultural mismatches
(9) the ability to skip trivial sentential elements
(10) the ability for inference and synthesis

III. LEARNING ACTIVITIES FOR COMPREHENSIVE LISTENING SKILLS

It is considered that listening comprehension constitutes simultaneous and complex perception, far from the individual and procedural identification of lexicon, speech sounds, syntactic patterns and sentential

meaning. For this reason, listening comprehension activities are essentially required for an ultimate and comprehensive understanding of the whole utterances. By categorizing a number of instruction activities presented in current research papers related to listening comprehension, this section will be devoted to the discussion of various and effective classroom listening practices.

1. Total Physical Response

According to Asher (1986), the process of adult foreign language learning is similar to that of child native language acquisition. It is often said that as the utterances addressed to children constitute interrogative sentences, they first respond to such interrogation physically, then beginning to answer it by means of verbal behavior. Likewise, adult learners are considered to follow this process of child native language acquisition. This is a useful and appropriate teaching method particularly at the elementary level of language learning. Children do actions instructed by their teacher, and it is desirable that such instruction initially takes the simple forms and changes into the complex ones gradually. As children are able to listen to something more than they speak, this technique is feasible (Phillips, 1993).

1) Listen and Do Activities

The intuitive listening skills are developed by intensive listening activities. The teacher prepares an inventory of interrogative sentences in relation to topics covering useful patterns and vocabulary together with linguistic perspectives. Students do activities following their teacher's instruction:

[Example]

Command: Stand up; Sit down; Give X a pencil, please; Open/Close the
                   door; Put up your hand.

Body: Touch your partner's back; Put your hand on your head; Hold up
            seven fingers.

Mime: Eat an orange; Drink a very cold fizzy drink; Watch a horror
            film.   (Phillips, 1993, p.20)

2) Simon Says

The teacher instructs this and have students do actions. That is, when
the teacher tells that Simon says, "Stand up" and then students do this
action. But in case the teacher says, "Stand up", they don't follow this
action.

2. Dictation

Dictation is a useful way of measuring the identification and
understanding of speech sounds and a knowledge of word combinations
and syntactic structures (Rivers, 1981). In this regard, Postovsky (1974)
states that dictation is more effective for the improvement of
communicative competence when it is in parallel with listening and
writing from the beginning of foreign language learning, and thereby it
assists students in developing four skills of language – listening,
speaking, reading and writing. That is to say, the proper application of
dictation to foreign language study is of great help to the overall
language activities: the practices of spelling, punctuation, grammar,
listening and writing, etc. Dictation practices are divided into spot
dictation and full dictation and it provides teachers with a good

measuring tool for the evaluation of listening comprehension (Paulston & Bruder, 1976).

1) Spot Dictation

The teacher tells students to dictate speech sounds, words, phrases and parts of sentences. Pronunciation can be learned through the practices of minimal pairs. Initially students are guided to dictate the words with difficult pronunciation which may impede their listening comprehension. The dictation of phrases may take the form of writing down the words and idioms students have already learned during their study of main text. This may result in promoting listening comprehension and the effect of review. In the case of sentence dictation, the teacher regularly leaves a few sentences blank in the fifth down to the ninth from the very beginning. Otherwise, the teacher leaves content or function words blank in an irregular fashion. In doing this, the first and last sentences remain as they are in order for students to get help from them in the understanding of the entire paragraph.

[**Example**] Please write down the words, phrases or sentences suitable for the parentheses as you listen to the following conversation:

A: I'd really like to go to Hawaii someday.

B: Oh? *(Why is that?)*

A: Well for one thing, *(the beaches)* are beautiful.

B: Beautiful in what way?

A: Oh, lots of *(white sand,)* different kinds of trees, you know.

B: I see... What's the weather *(like there?)*

A: Most of the time *(it's really nice.)*

B: Sounds nice!   (Lee, 1998, p.59)

2) Full Dictation

This is a format which requires the dictation of full sentences. The dictation materials are selected to be compatible with the student's level of comprehension. So the student may not lose his interest at the initial stage. To keep the student's motivation alive, the teacher chooses the materials with which the student has already got familiarized. The length of sentences should not be too long. Gradually various and unfamiliar materials in length and content areas may be used for intermediate and advanced level of dictation practices.

[**Example**] Please dictate the following conversation:

 A: Do you hang out with friends on the weekend?
 B: Yeah, sometimes.
 A: Where do you hang out?
 B: Usually at coffee shops, especially Saturday nights and Sunday
    afternoons.   (Richards, 1998, p.42)
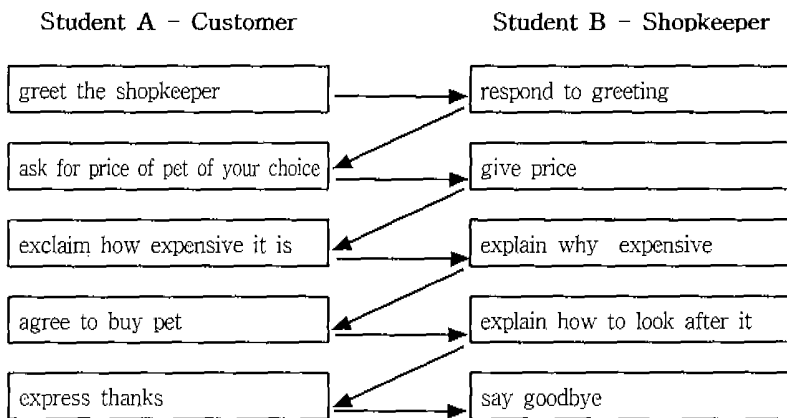
3. Role Play

Role is the part taken by a person or his counterpart in any specific situation, and play is the creative and sensible performance of the student's role given in any stable circumstance. What students perform their designated roles is in line with children's playing as teachers, doctors, nurses or soldiers. Ladousse (1987, p.12) mentions that the main purpose of role playing lies in the enhancement of students' fluency and interactive motives as a combined mechanism of communicative techniques: this method leads students to practice speaking with various functions, structures and vocabulary, to develop sociolinguistically appropriate language use based on interpersonal relationships, and to

arouse interests and imagination by alleviating anxiety. He also suggests the following guidelines for role playing: to implement individual group activities, to shorten activities until role players get used to their roles, to make role players understand their situation and contents before doing actions, to choose routine topics at the beginning stage, to gradually inhibit role players from using their native language, and to restrict the time-frame of their role playing.

1) Guided Role Play

Students are told to make an impromptu conversation in accordance with a functional flow chart. The teacher guides students to overcome the emotional tension that may have them feel uncomfortable in starting a conversation. The command of language should take a variety of forms in relation to the situations selected by the teacher. Individually different flow charts in functions are designed for the entire classroom activities. Dividing the whole class into several groups, the teacher distributes such

[Example]   At the Pet Shop

Student A − Customer	**Student B − Shopkeeper**
greet the shopkeeper	respond to greeting
ask for price of pet of your choice	give price
exclaim how expensive it is	explain why expensive
agree to buy pet	explain how to look after it
express thanks	say goodbye

(Ladousse, 1987, p.39)

flow charts to them. Each group are instructed to decide who takes on the role A or B and to draw up a complete unit of conversation.

2) Story Role Play

Students are told to set up their role play on the basis of the characters appearing in the stories they have read. Initially a story is selected, which may be a short story, fairy tale, excerpt from a novel, or simple story introduced by their textbook. The finally selected story is distributed to the class. And students have a chance to talk about the characters in association with their role play. The class is divided into several groups of the number of the characters they have chosen. Students select the characters they wish to take on with the story given to them. For a few minutes they are offered another chance to look into their roles, taking into account the characters. Finally the teacher instructs them to formulate the proper scenes extemporaneously without any further reference to their handouts.

3) Small Talk

Students are told to perform their role play in a specific situation without a special purpose. A bundle of role cards are prepared in conformity with any selected situation or the counterpart's situation. The class is divided into pairs or groups, and then role cards are distributed. The teacher confirms whether students have understood their situation, and gives them a few more minutes so that they may get familiarized with their roles and have confidence. Putting their role cards upside down, students begin the role play. The teacher moves around the classroom unnoticed and confirms if it is going well and should pay attention to any unexpected problem. The teacher designates one of the pairs or groups and gives a chance of presentation before the entire class.

[**Example**] Please listen to the following story and answer the questions given below:

A: Would you rather wear fashionable or comfortable clothes?

B: Oh, I prefer being fashionable.

A: Really?

B: Sure.

A: Then why are you wearing that flannal vest and those baggy jeans?

B: Oh, this is grunge. It's the latest fashion.

A: Well, if that's fashionable, I'd rather be unfashionable!

Questions:

1. Do they have the same opinion in the sense of choosing clothes?

2. As for you, which do you prefer being comfortable or fashionable?

(Nunan, 1995, p.96)

4. Instruction with Songs

Murphey (1993, pp.6~7) emphasized the importance of music and song in language learning: (1) songs precede the human language development; (2) songs play a significant role in the language development of children; (3) songs fulfill man's emotional desire; (4) songs strengthen short and long-term memory capacity; (5) singing activities are concerned with Piaget's egocentric language and Chomsky's language acquisition device; (6) songs have high emotional and motivational effects because of being simple and repeated conversational language; and (7) songs help listeners relax and keeps their interest alive. On the other hand, Lozanov (1978) recommends the use of background music during conversation reading. This is based on the argument that music stimulates the right hemisphere of the brain and has listeners open their mind towards language by relieving psychological anxiety (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

1) Completing Song Words

This is an activity for increasing listening comprehension, inference power, reading and writing abilities. Teachers select songs suitable for the language competence of the class and make students fill in blanks with appropriate words or phrases. Song words are distributed for the group work. To facilitate comprehensive understanding, teachers read song words aloud, recommending students to think about suitable words to be filled in. Teachers explain unfamiliar words if necessary. Students are guided to fill in the blanks after listening to songs. Finally students are encouraged to answer the questions and to listen to songs again for their subsequent check-up activities.

2) Replacing Song Words

This activity aims to build up vocabulary, exercise grammatical categories and recognize the change of meaning. The words of songs are distributed to students. Students do the following: the tense of all verbs are changed into past from present forms; contrastive meaning is created by replacing adjectives and verbs; and gender forms are mutually exchanged. And discussion is made through group activities to confirm the results of replacement work.

5. Listening Activity through Pictures

1) Picture Drawing

At the beginning stage, students are led to draw simple pictures and gradually to do complicated ones. It is important for them to be able to draw something as instructed. So students are encouraged to select diagrams or other prototype pictures. Pair work is also recommendable: one explains the target picture and the other draws the picture requested

by his/her partner. This may lead students to exercise listening and speaking.

[Example]

First, draw a square five inches long. Second, inside the square, draw a circle with a five inch diameter. Third, draw diagonal lines from corner to corner. And finally, put a vertical line at the center of the circle.
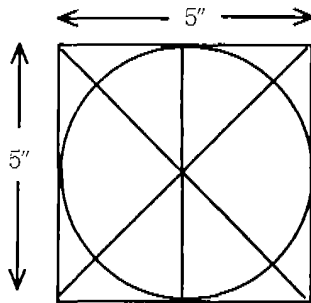

(Im, 1997, p.60)

2) Completing Pictures

This is of particular use to students at the elementary level. It consists of various activities: Students draw the basic features as instructed. At this time, drawing activity itself is not for the promotion of artistic function, but for the improvement of listening skills. To sustain the continuity of listening activity, teachers recommend students to draw only the outlines of the target picture.

[Example]
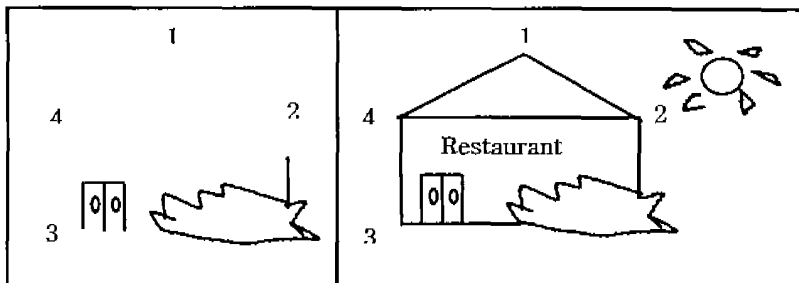
INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Would you draw a triangle connecting 1 to 2 to 4 in the unfinished picture?
2. Would you draw a vertical line from 4 to 3?
3. Would you draw a picture of the sun above line 2 to 1?
4. Would you draw a line from 3 to the bush?
5. Would you write the word restaurant below line 2 to 4?

(Im, 1997, p.60)

3) Connecting Pictures in Order

Teachers present many pictures attached with individual numbers. Students put those pictures in order after listening to the teacher's instruction. It is advisable to avoid the pictures that appear to have been already connected with one another without any necessary explanation.

4) Storyline Picture Sets

After listening to the story about a set of pictures, students are instructed to choose the picture in question.

[Example]

Listen to the dialogues and match them to the correct pictures.

   1) Son: What does Uncle Erik look like?

     Mother: He has long hair and a long beard.

         This is a picture of him.

     Son: Wow! He looks like grandfather.

   2) Coworker 1: What does your daughter look like?

     Coworker 2: She's tall and thin.

         She has curly black hair.

     Coworker 1: Is her hair short?

     Coworker 2: No, it's medium length.   (Holmes, 1999, p.30)

5) Telling a Story with Pictures

Students in pairs are guided to discuss the contents of the picture. This is also feasible through questions/answers or group discussion.

6) Labeling Items on Pictures

After listening to what the speaker says, students recognize a person or a thing and indicate items on pictures. This is designed to keep students from possible confusion during the listening comprehension.

7) Matching Pictures

After listening to the speaker(s) introducing a person, a thing or a scene, students are instructed to choose the picture in question. It is possible to control the degree of difficulty by using similarities or differences between pictures, illustrations or conversations.

6. Completion

1) Completing Matrix

Teachers may provide a matrix or students may draw it. While listening to the information provided, students are guided to fill in the matrix with appropriate data.

[Example]

1. A : May I help you, madam?

   B : Yes, I'd like these gray shoes, size eight medium.

   A : I'll see what I can find.

2. A : Yes, sir. Would you like to try on these black shoes?

   B : Yes, I would ... a size ten and a half medium, please.

   A : I'll bring them in a minute.

	SIZE	WIDTH	COLOR	PRICE
MRS. BURTON	(8)	medium	gray	$29
MR. REDFORD	10 1/2	medium	(black)	$32

2) Completing a Form or Chart

This is an activity for the exercise completing a form or chart with a variety of information during the listening to incoming data. It is possible to motivate students easily through a built-in framework like a chart.

3) Completing Blanks

This is an activity completing blanks while listening to input data. It may be necessary to offer the appropriate number of blanks as student cannot read data at a normal speed of utterances. Both fiction and non-fiction are equally recommendable. Poems or songs may attract

students' interest and normally require pre-listening activity for effective guessing.

7. Predicting

1) Predicting prior to Listening

Teachers give some useful information required for answering the questions prior to listening activities. This background information normally covers data related to the speaker or the topic selected. This is more suitable to advanced class or mature students than others.

[Example]

Mary and Mr. Pearson:
Background Information: Mary has worked for the sales department of a furniture company for over ten years. Recently she applied for the position of head of the sales department at the company.   Mr. Pearson, the head of the company, chose a person named Jack Bridgeman for the job instead of Mary. Mary thinks she should get the promotion instead. She goes to talk to Mr. Pearson. She wants Mr. Pearson to change his decision.

What do you think Mr. Pearson will say?

(a) If you think you can handle the job, I'll change my decision and give the job to you.
(b) We think we made the best decision. We're not going to change it.
(c) Please talk to Jack and decide together who should get the new job.

2) Predicting during Listening

This is an activity predicting what may happen in the near future under the circumstance given. In reality students fail to predict the future events accurately. So it is necessary to accept alternative expressions instead of what the speaker has already said. Students usually need sufficient time to predict and complete their job. Teachers for this reason may use a stop button to give enough time to students. For example, teachers may ask students to pretell what is going to happen in the end while stopping listening to the text.

8. Finding out Particular Information

This is related to finding out particular information through listening activities such as news, weather report and panel discussion. It is easier to motivate students particularly when teachers give them opportunities to listen to factual information for practical purposes by employing real-time data. Students are guided to focus their attention on particular items and to neglect other supplementary information.

9. Summarizing

Students may rely on their notes or memory in order to summarize what they have listened to. Stories are considered adequate when students use their memory. The temporal order of stories and the curiosity they arouse make it possible for students to memorize something more easily. Students need to recognize core and periphery parts. It is recommended to gradually increase the quality and quantity of information through the activities that require summarizing input data ranging from simple forms to complex ones.

10. Labeling

This is the activity to guide students to label pictures or diagrams before or during the listening comprehension. Although students can label all the items before listening, they may be more motivated by satisfaction from positive feedback. Teachers may give prior information about vocabulary in case students are expected to encounter too difficult words.

11. Activities through Humor, Jokes and Caricatures

Humor, jokes and caricatures attract students' interest and offer chances to get access to practical expressions and foreign cultural background. Teachers select materials acceptable to students and lead them to learn pronunciation, new vocabulary and sentence patterns, followed by questions/answers, oral presentation and subsequent discussion.

[Example] A Caricature
  · Listen to the conversation
  · Practice this conversation with a partner.
  · Now try once more.
  · Use your own ideas.

(Ellis, et al. 1996, p.23)

12. Training through Screen and News Media

Students are offered ample opportunities to enjoy watching or listening to news, weather reports, advertisements, game programs, etc. These activities may strongly motivate them to study real-time language data at a normal speed with speech sounds alive. Language materials used in newspapers, magazines and trademarks are also considered educational. Nowadays using multimedia based on computers is in the spotlight. So internet and other available programs can be applied to classroom teaching and home study.

Ⅳ. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Listening comprehension is the mental process which requires meaning negotiation for the interpretation of the speaker's intended message on the basis of comprehensive understanding of linguistic signals, extralinguistic information and psychological/sociocultural factors. So listening comprehension entails a variety of obstacles or barriers different from reading processes, resulting in a great deal of pressure on learners. The listening practice based on audiolingualism put strong emphasis on imitation, memorization, repetition and pattern practice for the improvement of speaking abilities, which in turn reduced students' motivation and the effects of listening comprehension training.

To improve students' listening skills, teachers are bound to help students sustain their high level of motivation and interest in listening comprehension. For this reason, students need to be exposed to a wide variety of language data together with multifaceted contextual factors. This method is expected to strengthen student's listening skills systematically. Thus, these research findings discussed above suggest effective listening strategies which take various tasks/activities, primarily

designed to be applied to classroom instruction. In addition, listening comprehension calls for affective, sociocultural and psychological aspects of the learner while needing to be complementarily underpinned by speaking, reading, and writing tasks. Accordingly teachers' formal instruction and learners' informal self-study should be combined to increase the efficiency of listening comprehension activities.

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