

SIGNIFICANCE OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN GERMAN AT THE G.C.E. ADVANCED LEVEL EXAMINATION OF SRI LANKA

N. Paranavitana^{1*}, HMSS Herath²

^{1,2}*Department of Languages, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka*

Abstract

Listening comprehension is a receptive skill, which ought to be developed methodically with specific strategies. The progress of methods of teaching German as a foreign language for many decades shows significant attention to the development of listening comprehension skills in the foreign language classroom. A close examination of the teaching and evaluation process of German in Sri Lanka shows certain discrepancies in teaching and testing listening comprehension at the school level. In-depth observation of the schools teaching German in Sri Lanka discloses many problematic areas in the teaching-learning environment, as well as demotivation in developing the listening skill, as it is not tested at state-level examinations. Empirical research on this matter revealed that apart from a lack of training and technical support at schools the evaluation system has a lacuna with regard to testing listening comprehension at state-run university entrance examinations at the GCE advanced level. Through the outcome of the research, suggestions are made to make the teaching staff of German aware of the significance of listening comprehension, a revision is made to the German curriculum, and a component to test listening is included in the state examinations in German with the adoption of the teaching and evaluation principles adopted by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Keywords: *Evaluation, Listening comprehension, Teaching German as a Foreign Language in Sri Lanka*

**Corresponding author: Tel.: + 94 (71) 908 6880; E-mail: nirosha@ssl.sab.ac.lk*

Introduction

Listening is the medium through which people gain a large proportion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and human affairs, their ideals, sense of values (Guo and Wills 2006: 3). Of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50 %; speaking 25-30 %; reading 11-16 %; and writing about 9 %” (Mendelson: 1994, p. 9). Peterson (2001), emphasizes the importance of listening in language learning and states that “no other type of language input is easy to process as a spoken language, received through listening ... through listening, learners can build an awareness of the inter-workings of language systems at various levels and thus establish a base for more fluent productive skills” (p. 87). Hence, listening has an important role not only in daily life but also in classroom settings. Most people think that being able to write and speak in a foreign language means that they know the language; however, if they do not have efficient listening skills, it is not possible to communicate effectively. That is, listening is the basic skill in language learning and over 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening (Nunan, 1998).

A glimpse at the historical evolution of teaching German as a foreign language in Sri Lanka from the methods perspective reveals that the main method by which the language instructions were done at the beginning was the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), where language learning was considered as learning sets of rules which aimed to help students to read and understand the literary works of the foreign language. It is evident that teaching listening and/or to have trained to teach listening to a text in a methodical manner was never a primary concern. With the advent of foreign language teaching the Direct Method (DM) was accepted as the natural method and became very popular as a major shift in teaching German as a foreign language. The proposed idea by this is to teach and learn German in German medium and this method concentrated on developing listening skills before other skills. Even though the target language was used in the classroom, there was no use of listening strategies to develop listening comprehension. Therefore, these two methods were followed by the communicative method. Of all the four main language skills, listening was the most influenced by those changing trends. In the 1970s, listening as a skill to develop, started to take place in language teaching programs besides speaking, reading, and writing. With the rise of Communicative Language Teaching in the late 1970s, teaching German for communication began to play a significant role and the importance of teaching listening increased. At present, attention to listening, and aural comprehension had gained a significant place in teaching and learning German as a Foreign Language.

Listening comprehension is a receptive skill. As it is an activity of listening to a text along with continuous live sound signals, the listener has to segment the stream of signals into meanings with prior knowledge of the language in which the listening text is transmitted. The listener has very little control over the speed of the sounds as well. Therefore, the listener has to repeat the reception as often as necessary to make sense of what's heard and spoken. Listening comprehension of recorded sounds is often more difficult than listening to dialogues and descriptions of daily life as it is not visible unless it is a video recording. Therefore, listening is a skill to be developed in the process of learning a language, as it unavoidably functions as a major component of the mode of communication and understanding of a new language. Listening effectively is crucial for people to sustain effective communication. This inevitably suggests specific areas of difficulty in the teaching-learning environment. Although the centrality of listening in German as a foreign language is well established today appropriate listening comprehension instruction is essential for target language competency. Given this fact, listening is one of the most neglected skills in German as a foreign language classroom in Sri Lanka. Both the German syllabus and the teachers pay more attention to reading and grammar, and teaching listening has not become a significant feature of the language teaching process.

Materials and Methods

A mixed method of both qualitative and quantitative research methods was integrated to reach a consensus in the discussion of research. Probability sampling is used to collect data on the existing situation and issues within the research problem in the practice of listening comprehension in the A/L classes; The sample group was the students, teachers, and authorities of the State examination department, as well as the National Institute of Education, were included in the qualitative research in order to get a broad picture of the agreements and disagreements at the bureaucratic level. The questionnaires include both independent and non-independent variables for a vivid analysis. Personal interviews would be held with teachers and authorities regarding the feasibility of applying the evaluation and its significance to the syllabus.

Results and Discussion

The most common drawback of the situation in the school environment could be considered the lack of technical assistance, as many schoolteachers are not equipped with the facilities to conduct listening comprehension at school. As the classrooms are open, the sound disturbs others as much as the concentration of the students does not retain for long. The side of teaching staff is not well trained with the required strategies to teach and test listening

comprehension, and as a result, both parties (teachers/students) lose motivation to do so, and consequently, they tend to skip such components in the textbook. As far as the evaluation is concerned, none of the district-level examinations or state-level examinations have a component for listening comprehension to be tested. This, on the other hand, discourages teachers and students from concentrating on developing the skill, as they find it useful to utilize that time to practice the skills tested in the examination. The examination department continues with the examination structure for German as it has done since its advent, and the National Institute of Education works rather independently from the examination department.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is an accepted fact at present that each of the four skills should be given an equal proportion of time in the language teaching environment as well as in the evaluation process. The results of the study done to examine the situation with the evaluation of German as a foreign language have revealed that German as a subject, even though it has many potentials, has drawbacks and pitfalls within the teaching and evaluation processes, as listening comprehension is not tested at any stage of the examination process in Sri Lanka. It is highly recommended that an assembly at an institutional level be held in order to discuss this matter regarding the evaluation and integration of listening comprehension and testing into the German syllabus. Another recommendation should be a serious consideration of adopting the common European framework of reference (CEFR) for the teaching and evaluation process of German, as it would be useful in the long run if the government-run exams are internationally accredited. A formalized teacher training program is suggested, especially in connection with one teacher training college in Sri Lanka, to place things in order.

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