# The Role of Inferential Ability in Listening Comprehension in English as a Foreign Language

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## Abstract

In general, speakers do not always provide all necessary information that they refer to and that they only utter the most obvious pieces of information for listeners to supply as bridging assumptions. For this reason, there are some cases where a listener is fully able to discriminate sounds, recognise words and identify grammatical units and pragmatic units, yet they cannot make any sense of the context. Thus, listeners must utilise inferencing in order to make sense of discourse. In order to understand the context, listeners are not only required to use their analytical skills in perception. Their skills of synthesis, or inferential ability, are also necessary. Inferential ability requires listeners to connect linguistic and other cues and to use background knowledge. In this paper, the role of inferential ability in listening comprehension in English as a foreign language learning will be discussed.

**Key words**: listening comprehension, inference, inferential ability, English as a foreign language

## Introduction

Although there are many factors which makes listening comprehension difficult in English as a foreign language (EFL), such as lexical difficulties, limitations in short-term memory, a lack of cognitive/metacognitive strategies and so on, in this paper the importance of 'inferential ability' as a top-down processing skill in EFL listening comprehension will be discussed. The term 'inferential ability' in this article will be used to describe an ability to;

    i) extract relevant information which is not explicitly given to listeners,

    ii) reconstruct relevant information from both linguistic and non-linguistic clues,

    iii) understand what a speaker really means at pragmatic level in EFL.

The notion of 'schemata' is also regarded as a part of inferential ability in this article.

Lynch (2006: 92) points out that there are two processes in listening comprehension, top-down processing and bottom-up processing, and defines them in their strictest sense as;

bottom-up processing would involve piecing together the elements in the speech signal in a linear fashion, in real time, as it is being spoken and heard. Top-down processing is broadly the converse of bottom-up, emphasizing the listener's hypotheses as to the speaker's meaning and, when appropriate, in modifying them to match new incoming information.

Also, many listening theorists have discussed listening comprehension in terms of a two-stage process, making a distinction between lower-level skills and higher-level skills (Rivers 1966; Carroll 1972; Oakeshott-Taylor 1977; Clark and Clark 1977; Hughes 1989).

However, in general, most Japanese learners in EFL listening comprehension tend to focus on rate of delivery and rely on studying lexical items (both by sight and sound), grammar and phonetic training, rather than focusing on the important role of inferential ability. Dunkel (1991), Richards (1983) and Ur (1984) claim the following eight characteristics of spoken language make the listening process difficult;

    i) clustering
    ii) redundancy
    iii) reduced forms
    iv) performance variables
    v) colloquial language
    vi) rate of delivery
    vii) stress, rhythm, and intonation
    viii) interaction

However, the root cause of misunderstanding or non-understanding need not always be those purely linguistic problems. Researchers in listening comprehension have frequently stressed the importance of 'higher-level' cognitive skills in the listening comprehension process (Brown and Yule 1983; Anderson and Lunch 1988; Rost 1990). Buck (1991) clearly shows how listening comprehension involves far more than the application of linguistic knowledge to process a propositional representation of a text; rather it is an inferential process in which listeners attempt to construct an interpretation which is meaningful in the light of their own assessment of the situation, their knowledge and experience. This is why I would like to examine the role of inferential ability in listening comprehension in English as a foreign language.

## Brief review of existing literature

Making inferences can be considered to be one of the key cognitive processes in constructing the

meaning of a text in both listening and reading comprehension. Yet there has been limited research conducted on inferential ability in listening comprehension, thus the sources in this literature review concern inferential ability in reading, but not listening. However, Rost (1990: 9) claims that the notion of listening is often considered in parallel to reading; both are texts with which readers interact, although the information in written or spoken text is packaged differently. Indeed, Eysenk (1990: 224), Clark and Clark (1977: 97) and Rost (1990: 62), do in fact indicate that listeners must utilise inferencing skills in order to make sense of discourse.

Of perhaps most relevance here, Takahashi & Tamaoka (1992) investigated the relationship between the reading ability and English proficiency of Japanese university EFL students and the ability to make inferences. The results of the experiment showed that the subjects were better able to answer literal questions than inferential questions in general. The performance of the skilled group on the inferential questions was better than that of the less-skilled group, whereas there was no difference in the performance of the two groups on the literal questions. The results also showed that making inferences demands the integration of ideas from various sentences in a text and the retrieval and utilization of background knowledge from long-term memory; with less able readers expected to be inferior to the skilled readers in this area. Their findings imply that for lower-skilled readers especially, syntactic knowledge is critical to their ability to accurately understand the meaning of a text. Yet for the skilled readers, who already have a sufficient knowledge of syntax, the higher-order cognitive skills such as inferential ability seem to play a more important role than syntactic knowledge in determining language proficiency levels. This contrast also shows that the level of proficiency of less able readers was more dependent on syntactic knowledge than on higher-order skills, such as inferential ability.

Stanovich (1980) suggests that lower-skilled readers have not acquired automatic decoding skills and therefore need more time for processing. Although they do not use Stanovich's term 'automatic decoding', other researchers such as Smith and Collins (1981), Ellis and Beattie (1986), and Kemper (1988) do have similar views on inference. This indicates that those sentences which require readers to make inferences need a longer time to be processed and they put a greater cognitive load on readers. In this they concur with Stanovich (1980) in claiming that learners who have not acquired automatic decoding skills need more time to process words and meaning.

Pretorious (2005) conducted research to investigate the relationship between the ability to make inferences and the level of academic skills in reading by focusing on anaphoric resolution. The findings showed that students who were not performing well academically were not skilled at resolving anaphora. Differences in anaphoric resolution diminished as proficiency in English increased. Successful anaphoric resolution decreased when the anaphoric tie required greater inferential processing. This was particularly evident among the academically weaker students.

Oakhill and Garnham (1988) also point out that skilled readers and lower-skilled readers differed when they had to decide the truthfulness or falseness of the sentences which were probable but not exactly the same as the original sentences. In comparison with lower-skilled readers, skilled readers were more likely to judge those plausible sentences as correct. In other words, skilled readers appear to understand a text by making use of inferences and actively trying to construct a meaningful representation of the text.

Other researchers shed light on inferential ability from the viewpoint of working memory. Smith (1975: 70) argues that slow word recognition might also make it difficult for lower skilled readers to integrate the previous information in the text with what comes later due to the rapid loss of information from their short-term memory stores. While readers can refer back to previous details within written texts as often as they wish, listeners usually do not have such control with spoken texts. This is the single most important difference between the two modes. Listeners are normally exposed to the speaker's on-line editing process and are required to edit and make sense of the very fluid text with very fluid features, such as variety of pronunciation (i.e. pronunciation of the same phonemes by the same speaker in different linguistic contexts as well as dialectal variations between speakers), irregular pauses, false starts, hesitation, self-revisions, and backtracking. Thus, in order to become advanced listeners, learners need a large working memory capacity.

Similarly, Just and Carpenter (1980) propose that lower-skilled readers often fail to integrate information in a text because they have little working memory space. Their research suggests that readers with a large working memory should be able to retain more of the text in their memory while processing new text, thus enabling them to integrate the information more completely (cf. Daneman and Carpenter, 1980). Further, commenting on working memory capacity and comprehension, Oakhill and Garnham (1988) state that lower-skilled readers suffer from a relatively low 'working memory' capacity compared with skilled readers, and that this could be a source of their comprehension problems; if the immediately preceding text cannot be remembered. It may then be difficult to integrate the ideas in the text to comprehend its overall meaning. Thus, either slow recognition of words or low working memory capacity may explain why lower-skilled readers are inferior to skilled readers in integrating information, and understanding a given text.

## Linguistic level

Listeners are required to activate inferential ability using at least four different levels; phonetic/phonological, lexical/semantic, grammatical and the pragmatic. In this paper, the pragmatic level will be discussed. According to Shaozhong (2005), pragmatics distinguishes two (or more) intents or meanings in each utterance or communicative act of verbal communication. The first intent or meaning is the informative intent, or the sentence meaning, and the second intent or

meaning is the communicative intent, or speaker meaning (Leech 1983; Sperber and Wilson 1986). The ability to comprehend and produce a communicative act is referred to as pragmatic competence (Kasper 1997) which often includes one's knowledge about social distance, differences in the social status between the speakers involved, cultural knowledge, e.g. politeness norms, and linguistic knowledge, both explicit and implicit. In this paper, it is the latter, pragmatic meaning, that will be my main focus. The following section outlines the different types of inferential ability and exemplifies these from the literature.

## Types

There are several different types of inferential ability described in the literature, but these differ according to author. Buck (1991) suggests that there are five different inferential types from the view point of test making in listening comprehension:

| | |
|---|---|
| Inference type 1 | to guess how a certain characters feels at some particular point in a narrative/ story |
| Inference type 2 | to find reasons for information clearly stated in the text |
| Inference type 3 | to make a deduction about some aspect of a story, which is very similar to previous type, expect that the listener not asked about clearly stated information |
| Inference type 4 | to make predictions on how listeners think a story will develop |
| Inference type 5 | to find reasons for what seemed like an obvious inference made by a test constructor |

**Table 1: Buck (1991)**

Rost (1990) asserts that there are four types/terms relating to listener construction of meaning with the word 'understanding':

| | |
|---|---|
| AU | Acceptable Understanding |
| TU | Targeted Understanding |
| NU | Non- Understanding |
| MU | Misunderstanding |

**Table 2: Rost (1990:62)**

He explains that NU refers to the listener being unable to draw any appropriate inference based on what a speaker has just said. MU refers to a conflict between the type of inference that the speaker had expected the hearer to draw from the speaker's utterances, and those inferences that the hearer actually has drawn. AU refers to inferences drawn by a listener that are satisfactory to both

the speaker and listener. TU understanding denotes a specific interpretation that was intended by the speaker.

## Examples

There are a great many examples given by many researchers in this field. In this article, inferential ability is mainly divided into two central categories; inferential ability relating to background knowledge, and secondly to politeness. As a very good example of how important the role of background knowledge in inferential ability is, Bransford and Johnson (1972: 400) demonstrate using the following text:

> The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step, otherwise you are pretty well set. It is important not to do things. That is, it is better to do too few things than too many. In the short run this may not seem easy but complications can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. At first the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another facet of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future but then one can never tell. After the procedure is completed one arranges the materials into different groups again. Then they can be put into their appropriate places. Eventually they will be used once more and the whole cycle will then have to be repeated. However, that is part of life.

Many readers/listeners might find this text somewhat difficult to understand - or at least very ambiguous, without a title. However, given the title is 'Washing Clothes', it is very clear that the title provides a context in which the appropriate background knowledge could be brought to bear and so aid comprehension before and during readers'/listeners' are exposure to the text.

Other works, such as Anderson *et al.* (1977), demonstrate how readers and listeners utilise schemata to interpret texts. Schema theory claims that familiar knowledge structures are triggered by the recognition of a sequence of related lexical items. The term schema was first used by Piaget in 1926, so it was not an entirely new concept, but Anderson expanded on it (Anderson *et al.* 1977). This learning theory views organised knowledge as an elaborate network of abstract mental structures which represent one's understanding of the world. He provides the following characteristics of schemata:

| 1 | Schemata are always organized meaningfully, can be added to, and, as an individual gains experience, develop to include more variables and more specificity. |
|---|---|
| 2 | Each schema is embedded in other schemata and itself contains subschema. |
| 3 | Schemata change moment by moment as information is received. |
| 4 | They may also be reorganized when incoming data reveals a need to restructure the concept. |
| 5 | The mental representations used during perception and comprehension, and which evolve as a result of these processes, combine to form a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. |

**Table 3: Anderson (1977: 418-419)**

Although the term 'inferential ability' itself is not used in Schema theory, schema, or background knowledge, is a critical component for comprehension. Anderson *et al.* (1977: 372) demonstrate, reproduced as (1) and (2) below, how 'prior thematisation' can affect text comprehension, clearly showing that even the very same text can be interpreted in a very different way given different titles. The underlined words [1] have totally different meaning with different titles.

(1)     Title A: A Prisoner Plans his Escape

Rocky slowly got up from the <u>mat</u>, planning his <u>escape</u>. He hesitated a moment and thought. Things were not going well. What bothered him most was <u>being held</u>, especially since the <u>charge</u> against him had been <u>weak</u>. He considered his present situation. The <u>lock</u> that held him was strong, but he thought he could <u>break it</u>.

(2)     Title B: A Wrestler in a Tight Corner

Rocky slowly got up from the <u>mat</u>, planning his <u>escape</u>. He hesitated a moment and thought. Things were not going well. What bothered him most was <u>being held</u>, especially since the <u>charge</u> against him had been <u>weak</u>. He considered his present situation. The <u>lock</u> that held him was strong, but he thought he could <u>break it</u>.

Smyth *et al.* (1994) also introduce the following short passage, (3) below, as an example of a text which requires an inferential ability:

(3)     When it got <u>late</u>, the road became <u>icy</u>. <u>I</u> yawned then shook myself to try and <u>concentrate</u>. Suddenly, the truck ahead swerved <u>out of control</u> and I saw a car being rammed on to the embankment.

No explanation is given for these underlined words in the text, yet it is not difficult to extract meaning from the text with one's background knowledge from the context;

| late | It is normal that the temperature decreases in the evening and at night. |
| icy | When the roads become icy, one can easily skid on them. |
| I | the driver of the vehicle |
| concentrate | the reason why I – the driver – should concentrate is not stated, but when the road is icy and slippery, there is a much greater chance of a car accident occurring. |
| out of control | Because of the icy road, it is slippery and the driver of the truck cannot control the steering wheel or the brake in the way he would like to control them. |

Levinson (1983: 112) also shows two examples to illustrate the role of inferential ability relating to deduction and one's background knowledge in listening comprehension;

(4)      A: Where's Bill?

           B: There's a yellow Volkswagen outside Sue's house.

(5)      Johnny: Hey, Sally, let's play marbles.

           Mother: How is your homework getting along, Johnny?

In (4) B does not explicitly say where Bill is. However, B leads A to reach a conclusion by appealing to shared information, i.e. they both know that Bill has a yellow Volkswagen. Therefore, A infers from shared background knowledge, here labelled 'information 1', adding the current situation 'information 2' in order to reach the conclusion in the following way:

(4a)     Information 1:   Bill has a yellow Volkswagen.

           Information 2:   There's a yellow Volkswagen outside Sue's house.

           Conclusion:     Bill might be at Sue's house.

In (5) it is assumed that this is a conversation between a mother and a boy. The boy would like to play but his mother refers to his homework. In this conversation, although no explicit information is given as to when the homework is meant to be done, it is clear that both his mother and the boy know it. Thus, the mother's utterance does not actually ask the degree of progress of the boy's homework, but is actually a request/demand that he should complete his homework before play;

(5a)     Information 1   Homework should be done before play.

           Information 2   How is your homework getting along, Johnny?

                         =Have you finished your homework, Johnny?

           Conclusion     If it has not been done, do the homework first.

The following examples of an inferential ability relate to politeness in listening comprehension. Grice (1975: 47) himself notes the importance of politeness as a factor in the account of conversational meaning. Earlier accounts of politeness in terms of rhetorical principles and maxims are to be found in Leech (1980: 9-39, 79-116). Widdowson (1983: 43) introduces the following example using the term 'interpretative procedures'. A standard illustration of how interpretative procedures is applied to realize illocutionary value is the exchange in (6) below.

(6)     A1: I have two tickets for the theatre tonight.
        B1: My examination is tomorrow.
        A2: Pity.

In this example, both interlocutors are giving implicit utterances relating to invitation. A1 is not simply providing B with gratuitous information. Thus, A1 actually means 'Would you like to come to the theatre tonight with me?'. One of the reasons sometimes one sometimes gives this sort of implicit information is for the purpose of saving face or for protecting someone's feelings. Although the function of B1 might look the same on the surface in the degree of implicitness in stating a mere a fact, it actually functions in a different way; as a form of politeness. What B is doing is not simply making an assertion. B knows the utterance functions as a refusal of the invitation and assumes A possesses this knowledge. Therefore, B1 is interpretable as 'No' but B leaves A to conclude the answer without being explicit, in other words, by being polite. This is a good example of an inference being successfully employed. In general, these utterances are interpretable as;

(6a)    A1: I have two tickets for the theatre tonight.
            = Would you like to come to the theatre tonight with me?
        B1: My examination is tomorrow.
            = Because my examination is tomorrow, I must study tonight. So I cannot go to
              the theatre tonight with you tonight.
        A2: Pity.
            = I understand that we cannot go to the theatre tonight together.

Although there is no direct question and no direct 'Yes/No' answer in these illocutions, it is clear that both A and B share the knowledge about routine behaviour from the response to the invitation with a refusal, i.e. *A2: Pity*. On the other hand, Widdowson (1983: 44) suggests if B was a particularly rude sort of person, or if there were factors in the situation which warranted abruptness, the exchange would have taken the following form:

(6b)     A: I have two tickets for the theatre tonight.
         B: No.

Clearly politeness is a part of inferential ability and this function is essential for being social in communication, since no matter how efficient the interaction is, being explicit is not always associated with being polite. Indeed, at least in English, as it is in Japanese, being indirect, implicit rather than explicit, is often thought of as more polite in most interactions.

Further to this, such shared interactional knowledge is often exploited by one or the other actors. Gabrielatos (1994a: 15) also gives an exchange, reproduced as (7) below, which requires inferential ability from the view point of politeness:

(7)      A1: Look at me! I'm fat and ugly.
         B1: Come on, you're not fat!

A makes an assertive utterance with an assumption that B would probably deny it in order to be polite. As A assumed, B denies this, but only partially, by referring only to the word 'fat' and not to 'ugly' also. Here, it is possible to infer that B might think that A is not extraordinarily fat but B might mean that A is ugly by deleting the word 'ugly' in B1. Thus, this illocution might be interpretable as;

(7a)      A1: Look at me! I'm fat and ugly.
             = I think I am fat and ugly, but at the same time I hope not. What do you think?
          B1: Come on, you're not fat!
             = You are not very fat . You might be ugly although I cannot directly tell you so.

Leech (1983: 82) employs the terms the CP (=The Cooperative Principle) and the PP (=The Politeness Principle) in the following examples: CP enables one participant in a conversation to communicate on the assumption that the other participant is being cooperative while the PP has a higher regulative role than this: to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place. Unless one is polite enough, the channel of communication breaks down. Leech (1983: 80) also introduces two sets of illocutions, (8) and (9) below, which require inferential ability relating to politeness:

(8)      A: We'll all miss Bill and Agatha, won't we?
         B: Well, we'll all miss Bill.

(9)      P: Someone's eaten the icing off the cake.

        C: It wasn't me.

In (8), similar to the example of Gabrielatos (1994a), B agrees with A, who asks B to confirm A's opinion. However, B only partially agrees, referring only to 'Bill' but not 'Agatha' thus leaving the listener to conclude what B really means, as in (8a) below.

(8a)     A: We'll all miss Bill and Agatha, won't we?

          = I think we'll all miss Bill and Agatha but what do you think?

        B: Well, we'll all miss Bill.

          = Well, we'll all miss Bill but I am not so sure about Agatha. I certainly will not miss

            her. Actually, I might be happy that Agatha is leaving.

In (9) P (parent) makes an assertive utterance on the surface. However, this utterance is stating not only the fact. It is also claiming that P more or less knows who the culprit is. Thus, the function of this utterance in speech act is not an assertion but actually an indirect accusation. Leech (1983: 81) introduces an example of inferential ability relating to politeness although he does not use the word 'inferential ability':

> Thus P's remark is interpreted as an indirect accusation; when C hears this assertion, C responds to it as having implicated that C may well be guilty, denying an offence which has not been overtly imputed. What suggests, then, is that the apparent irrelevance of C's reply is due to an implicature of P's utterance. C responds to that implicature, the indirectness of which is motivated by politeness, rather than what is actually said.

This section has used conversational exchanges to demonstrate how important the role of inferential ability relating to background knowledge in listening comprehension is. Indeed, Cody (1979) considers background knowledge to be not merely an addition to comprehension, but rather an essential component of it. Inferential ability, then, is the core of comprehension, since there are cases where language elements, e.g. lexis and syntax, pose no obstacles, yet an illocutionary act is difficult or even impossible to comprehend. The following section discusses problems associated with researching the role of inferential ability in listening comprehension in English as a foreign language.

## Problems

Many researchers refer to the problems of researching the role of inferential ability in comprehension. For example, Urquhart and Weir (1998) claim that it is impossible to gain direct

access to the listening process itself. We can never actually observe the problems students may experience and the skills they use. We are able to only deduce what the listeners did with the message and what they found difficult by examining their response – whether this is spoken, written or non-verbal. Rost (1990) also suggests that there are at least six discernible problems, as follows:

| 1 | To define in some way what it means to say that someone 'knows' a certain thing. |
|---|---|
| 2 | To test the person's knowledge. |
| 3 | No details of the process is available/observable. |
| 4 | Fluid/constantly adaptable from the text. |
| 5 | Missing description (of schemata). |
| 6 | Loose notion. |

**Table 4: Rost (1990:62-89)**

Inferential ability, or an ability to infer using individual background knowledge is at the centre of comprehension, yet it is not easy to define what background knowledge is. To define what it means to say that someone 'knows' a certain thing is not easy. When its notion is loose and its description is missing and ambiguous, it is natural that it is difficult to survey it. As Rost (1990) states here, the notion of background knowledge varies from person to person. Some might consider this problem as being similar to a cultural difference. However, the concept that someone 'knows' a certain thing is not always the very same within the same cultural background; a difference may occur even in the very same family. For example, when gender, generation, education, profession, religion and other variables are different, knowledge and construal of something can certainly be different even within the same family, let alone between different cultures.

Also, another major problem of schemata is that they grow and change continuously as new information is required. Schemata change moment by moment as information is received: we are constantly leaning something new everyday.  Widdowson (1983: 63) also indicates the ambiguity of schemata, i.e. that a schematic level of linguistic organisation has 'ontogenetic plausibility'. The ambiguity of schemata is not only to identify which given information is to be related to an item of new information, but also to interpret that relationship in such a way as to incorporate it into an appropriate frame.

Another negative aspect of inferential ability arises when learners feel internal conflict if they are trying to assimilate schemata which contradict their previous suppositions. Teachers need to understand and be sympathetic to this tension. Deep-seated schemata are hard to change. An individual will often prefer to live with inconsistencies rather than to change a deeply held value or

belief.

In the final section, some pedagogical implications relating to inferential ability in listening comprehension at classroom level will be suggested.

## Pedagogical implications

Although the notion and nature of schemata or background knowledge is ambiguous, listeners and readers must be aware of the important role of inferential ability in listening comprehension in English as a foreign language since the core of comprehension lies in inferential ability. Anderson and Lynch (1988) introduce the following learner strategies along with the problems:

| 1 | Ambiguity of reference:Finding an appropriate gloss for the item being used in the discourse. |
|---|---|
| 2 | Continuity of co-reference;<br>　　i) fully repeated form<br>　　ii) a partially repeated form<br>　　iii) with a lexical substitution<br>　　iv) with a pronominal form |
| 3 | Unfamiliarity with specialised jargon |
| 4 | Lexical fuzziness |
| 5 | Multiple co-reference possibilities |
| 6 | Unlikely reference |

**Table 5: Anderson and Lynch (1988)**

Here, Anderson and Lynch (1988) use the term 'gloss' which means definition in ambiguity reference. They claim that when learners come across ambiguity of reference, they tend to find an appropriate gloss for the time being used in the discourse. This problem and the strategy are related to other problems and strategies; lexical fuzziness and multiple co-reference possibilities. When listeners listen to a lexically fuzzy text, or a  text with unfamiliar or specialised jargon and/or an unlikely reference, they might make assumptions and/or guesses of meanings, or they may tolerate their ignorance or ask for definitions, if they can. When listeners listen to a text with multiple co-reference possibilities, they may select the most salient gloss among other possibilities. In the light of this, once the role of inferential ability in listening comprehension in EFL is better understood, the following pedagogical implementations might be helpful for listeners:

i)　To teach the role of inferential ability in listening comprehension in EFL classrooms

ii)　To teach general knowledge and generic concepts.

iii)  To help learners build schemata and encourage them to make connections between ideas.

In addition to these points, Gabrielatos suggests some additional useful pedagogical implementations, shown in table 6 below:

| 1 | To focus not only on the decoding of surface meaning, but also on interpretations. |
|---|---|
| 2 | To teach grammar and lexis in context and through texts rather than in isolated sentences |
| 3 | To use authentic or authentic-like texts and avoid exposing learners only to texts where meaning is expressed (over) explicitly. |
| 4 | To inform learners of relevant cultural aspects of the language. |
| 5 | To guide learners to use their knowledge, experience and belief consciously and flexibly. |

**Table 6: Gabrielatos (1999b: 14)**

Further to this, a rather large number of both listeners and instructors assume that all learners' difficulties lie in the 'pure' linguistic areas, phonetics, phonology, syntax and semantics. In Japan, especially, the development of skills in listening comprehension in EFL receives only limited attention, compared with the acquisition of knowledge of phonetics, phonology, vocabulary and grammar and getting used to the natural speed of utterances of native speakers of English. As has been already discussed in this article, there are many cases where listeners have absolutely no difficulties with 'pure' linguistic matters, yet still comprehension is lacking. It is therefore vital to enlighten teachers to the role of inferential ability when teaching listening comprehension within an EFL curriculum.

Secondly, some aspects of learners' difficulties could be traced to insufficient inferential ability relating to background knowledge and general knowledge, especially in cross-cultural situations. Teachers must help listeners to stimulate and activate their inferential ability and must encourage them to make connections between the network of their background knowledge through various types of activities such as discussion, songs, role play, illustrations, visual aids; and explanations of how a piece of knowledge applies are some of the techniques used to strengthen connections. These activities are helpful for better comprehension, even in their first language. To activate previously gained knowledge is also helpful in engaging inferential ability prior to tackling a new text.

To summarise, although lexical difficulties are one of the most highly cited sources of listening comprehension problems, even by advanced learners, both teachers and learners must be aware of how important the role of inferential ability in listening comprehension in EFL. Teachers must encourage listeners to build up schemata or background knowledge outside the classroom, even in their first language, so that they can activate more inferential ability. To focus on how important a

role inferential ability is in listening comprehension merely within the classroom environment is certainly not enough.

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**Notes**

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