



## **IS LISTENING TEACHABLE? A STUDY IN TEACHER ATTITUDES**

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### **Abstract**

Listening is both academically and institutionally the most neglected skill within Indian academia. Though it may be due to colonial factors, there has been inadequate postcolonial awakening among stakeholders like teachers, parents, and learners to the reality that speech is primary and that listening is the gateway to acquisition of speaking skills and word power. While (effective & intensive) listening is prerequisite to speaking, it is the most important academic skill from the view of the learner. It facilitates students to follow lectures, take notes, and to do all that is imperative in their study. In fact, the amount of students' exposure to listening at the institution becomes the defining criterion for it to be recognized either as an English medium or a regional medium institution. It is therefore a necessity that listening finds appropriate slot within the descriptive and prescriptive syllabi of all English courses at all levels. Furthermore, the teaching and learning of listening in ESL classroom is qualitatively different from that of the mother tongue. Diagnosis of the root cause of the problems in teaching and learning ought to precede strategies and solutions. Teachers as facilitators and students as learners are the starting point for this twin tasks. This empirical study attempts to elicit the teacher attitudes toward teaching listening and learner attitudes toward learning listening. Besides, it also discusses a few pedagogically viable strategies to teaching and learning listening.





**Keywords:** Intensive & Extensive Listening, Academic Skills, Language Attitudes, Active & Passive Listening, Types of Listening

### Background of the Study

Listening is normally not included in language curriculum within Indian academia. There has neither been a complaint against, nor an endorsement of this exclusion. Learners' and teachers' attitude toward this piquant phenomenon has never been sought and interrogated. Anyone who is well-informed about the macro-skills of language in the order of LSRW can easily grasp the importance of listening. Listening is the first and most fundamental beginning skill of language acquisition or learning. Ironically, teachers of English with a sense of historicity about the introduction of English in India are silent about this academic negligence.

Colonial language curriculum was based on Grammar-Translation method which treated English as a dead language like Latin that was taught to English children. The GT privileged reading and writing over listening and speaking. Colonial curriculum sought to produce docile clerks who, otherwise ought not to speak to the White master. English had never been a conversational language between the ruler and the ruled, but a mentally and physically disciplining language that was taught through English Classics to make them readers of Western values and clerks for the Company. Hence, there was no need for listening and speaking.

While desire for speaking English keeps on burgeoning with the changed role of English from being the language of westernization once to that of modernization now, and of a national language then to a global language now, post-colonial educational realities are oblivious of the need and demand for listening and speaking skills. Academics are selfish in the sense that they are not professionally honest enough to confess their scholastic insufficiency to teach listening on account of their literary education and training that is biased toward reading and writing. It incidentally accounts for their academic deficiency in testing what is not or cannot be taught (listening!) Thus, the greatest and most irreparable casualty caused to language curriculum is the neglect of listening as an active, productive academic skill.





## Research Questions

Since the present study is empirical in nature, it aims at addressing the following research questions:

1. What are listening skills (for)?
2. What do practicing English teachers and prospective English teachers say about listening as a teachable and an academic skill?
3. How does active listening differ from passive listening?
4. Can listening be taught and tested?

## Research Hypothesis

“Listening is a teachable skill and therefore ought to be taught and tested” is the hypothesis that guided the present research attempt.

## Objective of the Study

The aim of the study is to sensitize English language educators on the need for teaching listening as part of the English language course at all levels by identifying micro-skills of listening and types of listening, and grading them at different levels of education from primary to tertiary. Teaching listening should also be accompanied by appropriate testing strategies that should suit the levels of learners.

## Review of the Literature

**D.R. Long (2011)** concludes his research findings with an affirmation that listening comprehension is a teachable skill though most practitioners lack a solid theoretical basis to comprehend its importance. **Mai et al. (2014)** examine the effect of schema construction activities on EFL learners’ listening performance. **Vandergrift (2004)** charges that teachers tend to overlook the process of helping students learn to listen. On the other hand, **Chastain (1988)** assert that both teachers and learners have propensity to ignore the magnitude of listening comprehension and to fix their attention on speaking. **Anderson and Lynch (1988: 64)** define





listening as “the means to mediate oral production.” From **Rubin and Meldelsohn’s (1995: 50)** standpoint, listening is an “active process in which a listener selects and interprets information which comes from auditory and visual clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express.”

### Research Design & Results

On the basis of several rounds of informal conversation on the importance of listening as an academic skill with the practicing teachers of English and MPhil scholars who are to become teachers of English in the near future and the review of articles published during the last a decade or so, a questionnaire was constructed on a three-point Likert Scale that ranged from “Agree” to “Don’t know” through “Disagree.” It carried fifteen statements about the beliefs of teaching and testing of listening. It was administered among 16 college teachers of English and 31 MPhil scholars. The rationale for the selection of these stakeholders to act as subjects for the present study is that the attitude of both teachers and those who would like to become teachers is important for any innovation in curriculum. While not much can be expected or achieved in the case of the present teachers whose views are already fixed and polarised, it is hoped that awareness can be created in those who are to start their teaching career on the ELT issues confronted and needs felt by them as learners. Pre-service language attitude formation is durable compared to in-service language attitude formation. Predictably, the return rate of teacher questionnaire is **57%** against scholar questionnaire which stands at **91%**. Hence, the present day students, who are in the making as tomorrow’s teachers, must be taken into confidence by sensitizing them on the suitability of language pedagogy and needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners who need English as a global language for innovation, invention, and creation in different subject domains.

The following is the result of the survey, and the attitudes of teachers and would-be teachers are measured on a simple percentage basis.





S.No	Statements	Teachers			Scholars		
		A	DA	DK	A	DA	DK
Scale ---→		A	DA	DK	A	DA	DK
1	Listening cannot be taught	25	75	-	52	39	10
2	Listening need not be taught	19	75		42	52	6
3	Listening has sub-skills	88			81	6	13
4	Listening can be acquired outside the classroom	88			71	16	13
5	Listening can seldom be tested	37	63		48	45	6
6	Parents should demonstrate listening & communicating skills at home	100			65	19	16
7	Listening skill acquired in L1 can be transferred to L2	69		31	48	42	10
8	There are types of listening	81		19	87	6	6
9	Listening is a passive receptive skill	63		37	52	32	16
10	I am happy that I do not waste students' time in teaching listening	6		94	61	35	
11	Students do listen to enough English from teachers	56	44		42	55	
12	Bottom-up approach is preferable to top-down approach	69		31	42	22	35
13	Improvement of listening skills need time commitment & exposure to multiple contexts	100			84	10	
14	Teaching listening is impossible in large classrooms	56	38		48	39	13
15	Testing listening is always subjective and therefore unreliable		63	25	48	22	29

The Table shows no significant variation in the attitude of both teachers and would-be teachers toward several beliefs about the teaching and testing of listening skills. The beliefs





where both of them significantly differ are in that while **42%** of scholars believe that listening need not be taught, **75%** of teachers think it ought to be taught. Ironically, **31%** of teachers do not know if bottom-up approach to teaching is preferable. It means that either they have not heard about this expression (though they have been following it in the class) or they do not follow any professional approach to teaching listening at all. While **63%** of teachers do not believe that testing involves subjective element and therefore it is unreliable, **48%** of scholars think otherwise. While **all** teachers expect parents to demonstrate listening and communicating skills at home, only **65%** of scholars think so. Both of them believe that listening can seldom be tested. It is not only surprising but also shocking to learn that both teachers and those who would like to become teachers have internalized a fallacy that listening is a passive, receptive skill rather than active, productive skill. **31%** of teachers do not know if listening skills acquired in mother tongue could be transferred to L2.

### Theoretical Reflections

The aim of teaching listening (comprehension) is to help learners of English develop skills to cope with listening to speak in real life. Listening is an important though difficult skill which is often overlooked in the formal teaching of English. **Vandergrift (2004: 3)** reasons out that “listening is probably the least explicit of the four macro language skills, making it the most difficult skill to learn.” It needs to be developed consciously and systematically.

### Sub-skills of Listening

Listening as a macro-skill cannot be targeted in any one class or a unit. It should be broken down to pedagogically manageable mirco-skills as follows:

1. Predicting what the speaker is going to talk about
2. Guessing at unknown words and phrases
3. Using one’s own knowledge of the subject to help one understand.
4. Identifying what is said and restraining relevant points; rejecting irrelevant information.





5. Recognizing discourse markers, e.g., now, finally, then, afterwards... and other cohesive devices
6. Understanding different intonation patterns and uses of stress etc.,
7. Understanding inferred information, e.g. speaker's attitude or intentions, etc.

The teacher can now aim at each micro-skill to be developed in learners in a few classes through appropriate authentic, relevant, and suitable materials. The same should be cumulatively assessed longitudinally and assessment profile of each individual learner should be maintained.

### **Reasons for Teaching Listening**

Listening is taught for two reasons: for perception and for comprehension. In the former, learners are given practice in identifying the different sounds, sound combinations, stress, and intonation patterns of the language. In the latter, learners are given practice in developing listening for understanding by using listening materials and conducting listening activities which take into account the real-life needs of learners. Listening materials should have a realistic context and they should be interesting and challenging for learners. Passages are not written texts spoken aloud but are to be modelled on heard speech. They should facilitate understanding rather than block. Listening activities aim at providing practice to learners in areas which pose problems for them. Therefore, it is important that listeners feel successful in doing activities.

### **Types of Listening**

Basically, there are two types of listening: Intensive and extensive. During intensive listening, learners listen very carefully and attentively. For example, while listening to directions, the listener listens with full concentration. Such listening materials are short and have a special task designed on each of them. There is some amount of challenge so that listeners feel motivated to complete tasks. It is through the completion of tasks that listeners get practice in specific listening skills. The intensive listening practice takes place in class and





should be so designed that it is practical, easy to administer, and can be completed within the time limit of a lesson. On the other hand, during extensive listening listeners listen to an interesting story, radio programme or anecdote. The listening material can be lengthy. Listeners listen for pleasure and are not expected to complete any worksheet or a task.

There are some more listening types on the basis of listening styles. Discriminative listening identifies the difference between various sounds. Comprehension listening involves attaching meaning to what is being listened to. Evaluative listening evaluates and analyzes the message being received. It engages in judging the acceptability of what is said depending upon how logical listeners find it to be. Attentive listening pays attention to the words being spoken. Pretence listening involves more hearing than listening. Selective listening involves the selecting the desired part of the message and ignoring the undesired part of the message. Intuitive listening is listening through the intuitive mind by silencing the other forms of internal dialogues going on simultaneously.

### Strategies to Improve Listening

Communication is not complete without effective listening. An attentive, active listening stimulates better speaking. Listening must be learnt since eighty percent of learning is facilitated through listening and therefore listening skills should also be acquired outside the classroom in natural settings. A good listener learns more than an indifferent listener. A good listener can even restructure vague speaking in a way that produces clearer meaning. They can detect prejudices, assumptions, and attitudes. At the same time, learning listening can be a bore to many. **Khanh (2006: 51)** contends that “listening has always been presumed to be the most difficult and boring skill to practice.” Here are a few tips to improve intensive and extensive listening skills:

1. If you get a chance to speak to English speakers, speak to them. Don't avoid them. They will be deliberately slow to listen to you. They know that you are using English as a second language.







2. Watch TV and films, but listen while watching!
3. Listen to radio if you think watching and listening gives you some concentration problem.
4. Read audio books. It is a book on a cassette tape that you can listen to someone reading the book to you.
5. Sing English songs, too
6. Practise pronunciation of difficult and new words
7. Join one-on-one conversations/conversation groups
8. Maintain eye contact even if the subject appears boring (There will be some useful information)
9. Examine the content and not delivery (Find out what the teacher says and not how he presents it)
10. Don't evaluate until your comprehension is complete
11. Listen for ideas (main ideas, central facts, organizational patterns)
12. Be flexible in note taking
13. Spend energy to pay conscious attention
14. Resist distractions (using mobile)
15. Develop capacity to listen to more challenging lectures
16. Keep your mind open
17. Capitalize on thought speed. One tends to think faster than speech. Speech speed is 100-200 words per minute while thought speed is 400-500 words per minute.

### **Barriers to Effective, Active Listening**

Developing effective listening involves two specific steps. One, abilities to recognize and deal with the barriers that prevent learners from actively listening should be developed. Abilities that help you listen with full attention and concentration should be developed. It should be in the form of certain behaviours that can give clue to the other person that they are being listened to. The following are some of the barriers to effective, active listening, but the list is not exhaustive. Anyone can also add to it from their own experiences.





1. The tendency to 'jump to conclusions' in the sense that we form judgment even before we understand what is being said
2. Trying to hear what we want to hear
3. Rejecting the point of view that differs from ours
4. Being so enthusiastic to the extent that we formulate and rehearse our response
5. Being inattentive in the form of think about something else
6. Having a closed mind with the intention of not being ready to hear what the other person has to say
7. Feeling anxious or being self-conscious
8. Entertaining biases and prejudices due to ignorance of the subject matter
9. Judging the other person either positively or negatively
10. Too much of incessant talking or interrupting
11. Foreign accent and culturally unfamiliar contents
12. Lack of interest in the subject being spoken about
13. Poor physical infrastructure that makes the listener lost concentration
14. Preoccupation with personal concerns and anxieties
15. Attitudinal disposition: "I-know-it-all" syndrome
16. Impatience
17. Emotional blocks—deep-seated beliefs in certain ideas

#### **Promotion of Active Listening through Parents and Teachers**

Active listening is not language-specific. Listening skills acquired in one's mother tongue can facilitate the learning of listening skills in L2 as well. Learners who are poor or good at listening in L1 are equally poor or good at L2. If this claim is true, why are Indian learners of English not good listeners in English? Tamil teachers complain that students do not listen to their lectures at all. Parents equally complain that children do not listen to them at all. They say that children do not have patience to listen to parents. In fact, listening skills are formed at home. Parents should demonstrate good listening and communicating skills at home in L1.





They can teach their children how to be active listeners and ask relevant questions. They should demonstrate the attributes of a good active listener: looking at the speaker in the eye and willing to avoid distraction like playing with gadgets or turning the television off. They should maintain eye contact and be interested when children are trying to say something. They should encourage children to talk and provide conversation starters like “Tell me about your day at school.”

Teachers need patience since learners take longer than adults to find the right word. It is because they still learning new vocabulary. They also take time to grasp what they listen. They slowly pick up listening to multiple contexts as they explain and explain things. They listen and speak as much as they speak and listen. These two skills are inextricably intertwined. The more they listen the more they speak; the more they speak, the more they listen. Vocabulary is common to both speaking and listening and it is acquired in and through listening and speaking. They should be exposed to multiple contexts. Classroom is one such context of situation. Teachers must expose them to various other contexts where they listen and speak.

Effective listening involves establishing eye contact and posture. They indicate clearly that learners are listening. It, however, requires interest, concentration, and time commitment. Teachers should take learners as their best friends. Best friends require mutual respect. Can listening be taught as a separate skill? Can it be developed solely in the classroom? Learners do not learn listening skills for the first time in their life in English classes. They only improve their listening skills or abilities or capacities or competencies. They have a strong foundation formed in the acquisition of L1. They require time commitment and exposure to unpredictable contexts of situation. It should not be mistaken that teachers cannot make the best out of the classroom time.

### **Importance of Active Listening**

Research findings in Second Language Acquisition prove that listening is not a passive, receptive skill though such a popular belief is still being entertained within the academia. On





the contrary, it is an active, productive skill that demands the listener to construct meaning either collaboratively by interacting with the speaker/teacher/fellow-learners or non-collaboratively without interacting with the speaker/teacher/fellow-learners. Listeners need to understand the context in both ways. The message itself does not contain meaning devoid of contexts. Besides, the teacher needs to organize classroom in such a way that active listening happens. It involves teachers speaking English naturally. Active listening engages listeners fully in what the speaker is saying and making sense of what is being spoken. It is a two-way communication where listeners actively respond to the speaker and listeners become speakers as well. They can ask questions, seek clarifications, and make comments on what is being listened to. Sometimes, responses can be non-verbal like nodding, smiling, and other facial expressions.

Active listeners do not merely listen, but engage in deep listening and analytical listening. It is a two-way communication. It requires much effort. Listeners analyze, evaluate, and summarize what they listen. On the other hand, passive listeners do not react to the speaker, but merely listen. It is a one-way communication. It does not require much effort. **Shu (2009: 133)** highlights that “traditionally, in language teaching, listening comprehension used to be thought of as a passive skill. Like reading, listening comprehension is now no longer regarded as a passive skill. The decoding of a message calls for active participation in communication between participants.” Learners tend to depend passively on teachers’ instruction.

### **Learners’ Styles of Listening**

Listening styles matter a lot while learners learn to improve their listening skills. According to **Sean Covey (2008)**, there are five different poor listening styles. They are spacing out, pretend listening, selective listening, word listening, and self-centered listening. Spacing occurs when they are so tuned out what the speaker is saying. It is like they are in another world. Pretend listening happens when they are not actually listening but act they are. It is





evident in their occasional response to the speaker. Selective listening happens when listeners pay attention to parts of the speech that interest them. Word listening occurs when they pay attention to the words that the speaker is saying and to their body language. When listeners hear everything from their own point of view, and not that of the speaker, self-centered listening takes place. Some listeners in judging what the speaker says instead of listening. Some others engage in giving advice instead of just listening. Sometimes listeners probe in the sense that they raise questions and try to dig up emotions even before the speaker shares with them.

## Testing Formats

What is taught should be tested. The extent to which learners have internalized the micro-skills of listening must be tested. As an academic skill, it can be tested through some of the following formats:

1. Listeners are required to listen to two words and indicate whether they contain the same vowel or not
2. Listeners should indicate which particular sound is contained in the problem words.
3. Listeners should identify the 'odd man out' in a set of three words
4. Listeners are required to recognize the occurrence(s) of a specified vowel sound in a whole sentence read out as a sentence.
5. Listeners are asked to associate the 'sound' of a word with the object it names
6. Listeners are asked to associate the 'sound' of a word with its proper spelling
7. Listeners should write on their answer sheets when the teacher dictates certain words
8. Listeners are asked to associate the 'sound' of a word with its meaning given as a word or phrase.
9. Listeners should recognize a word from its 'sound' and indicate its meaning and spell it correctly
10. Listeners listen to the word and indicate whether first or second syllable stressed





11. Listeners listen to a set of three words and indicate which one has a different syllable stressed as compared with the other two
12. After listening to sentences, listeners underline all the stressed syllables in them
13. Listeners underline the tonic syllable
14. Listeners are asked to grasp the meaning conveyed by the tone
15. Listeners listen to following conversation and the question on it. Write your answer on the answer sheet

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

The study was conducted on teachers and research scholars of an autonomous college research department where skills-wise English language curriculum is being followed for all undergraduates students under Part II General English. Any attempt to read the findings in other contexts must be made with caution. Learners' views could have been sought on the teaching and testing of listening skill. Listening competence of the present learners should have been taken into account since they have picked it up without any explicit teaching of listening either in the school or college curriculum.

An attempt can be made to study the relationship between schema construction activities and listening performance. Script theory could also be applied to listening as well as other skills. Metacognition is another area to be applied for teaching and learning listening skill. Attitude study is yet another area where attitudes of different stakeholders like parents, teachers, students, employers, and administrators can be elicited. Such studies might help curriculum developers and policy makers to give due weight to the teaching of listening in the future.

### **Conclusions**

L2 listening competence is a complex skill that needs to be developed deliberately and consciously. It should be institutionalised at the lower level of education. Learners can be encouraged to reflect on the process of listening without the fear psychosis toward evaluation.





They should be guided through the process of listening so that they can become independent in their learning process. They should also be trained for different types of listening, such as listening for main ideas, for details, and for making inferences. They should be presented with extensive listening tasks so that they may lead to personalized speaking. In the light of the results discussed in the article, it can be inferred that the hypothesis is partially validated. Listening is teachable; therefore, it should be taught and tested!

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