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**ON VARIOUS COMMUNICATION EXCELLING
ACTIVITIES. TEACHING THE SKILL
OF LISTENING WITH THE HELP
OF DIFFERENT EFL TEACHING PROCEDURES**

**O różnych ćwiczeniach doskonalenia komunikacji.
Nauczanie umiejętności słuchania
z pomocą różnych procedur nauczania
języka angielskiego jako obcego**

Abstract

Teaching the skill of listening through various methods can positively influence students' communicative abilities. Speaking is considered to be of utmost importance in the process of teaching and learning EFL and it is essential for the students to help them be communicable in the 21st century. The aim of

this paper was to present results of a study in which we made an attempt to answer the question whether students are able to enhance their speaking abilities through practicing the skill of listening comprehension via different procedures (Bottom-Up; Top-Down and Dictogloss). In the experiment we looked at three study groups of elementary school EFL students ($N = 72$). All the learners were Polish of similar linguistic background. In the paper we discuss the results of pre- and post-tests administered to each group of the participants.

Key words: listening comprehension, speaking skill, technology, communication, English language, communicative competence

Streszczenie

W artykule omówiono sposoby nauczania umiejętności słuchania za pomocą różnych procedur oraz badanie ich wpływu na doskonalenie zdolności komunikacyjnych uczniów. Jako że umiejętność mówienia uznawana jest za niezwykle ważną w procesie nauczania i uczenia się języka angielskiego, a także niezbędną do komunikowania się uczniów w XXI wieku, zdecydowano się uwzględnić i przedstawić w artykule ten obszar tematyczny. Celem badania była próba sprawdzenia, czy uczniowie są w stanie poprawić swoje umiejętności mówienia poprzez ćwiczenie umiejętności rozumienia ze słuchu za pomocą różnych procedur (Bottom-Up, Top-Down oraz Dictogloss). Utworzono trzy grupy badawcze, które łącznie obejmowały 72 uczniów języka angielskiego uczęszczających do jednej z krakowskich szkół podstawowych. Wszyscy uczniowie byli Polakami o podobnym bazowym poziomie językowym. Finalne dane badania oparto na wynikach testów przed i po zastosowanej technice oraz statystycznych wynikach t -testów przeprowadzonych w każdej grupie uczestników.

Słowa kluczowe: rozumienie ze słuchu, umiejętność mówienia, technologia, komunikacja, język angielski, kompetencje komunikacyjne

Introduction

The concept of English as a lingua franca (LFE) has become an important issue in global language teaching policies. More specifically,

it provides a discussion on the emerging perspectives related to teaching the skill of speaking. The students' proficiency belongs to the most important elements of language changes, as the nature of language use and teaching has been transformed from being a receiver of linguistic information to being an active user of language-related knowledge in the international environment. That is mainly why the way people use and understand language teaching and learning undergoes constant changes, with new ideas on how to transfer knowledge in class, language acquisition and learning can be improved (Turula 2010). A number of various teaching procedures were hence at rearranging and adjusting the language norms to the actual needs of learners.

As observed by Turula (2010, p. 12), the present educational situation in Polish schools requires a significant and demanding effort from the teachers when they select the most effective and beneficial ways to teach students communicative skills successfully. It occurs due to the fact that mastering speaking skills, apart from the listening ones, is considered to be of the greatest importance in active and direct communication. In order to deal with this challenge we chose different procedures of teaching listening and applied them to three different groups of students. The listening techniques used included Bottom-Up (Group 1), Top-Down (Group 2) strategies, and the Dictogloss (Group 3). The Bottom-Up strategy goes from the specific to the general, whereas the order of activities in the Top-Down approach is the reverse one (from the general to the specific); the Dictogloss strategy is based upon a short dictation, the text of which needs to be reconstructed on the grounds of the keywords that have been grasped and/or noted down when listening to the text being dictated to students. In addition, the groups were allowed to use new technologies while using each of the techniques, to improve the effects of learning even more. We applied a language test to each student in each group to have a baseline for their improvement, if such was to occur. The results obtained in our study suggest that the application of a technique based on excelling listening comprehension helped the students improve their oral abilities, what was evidenced when comparing their pre- and post-test results.

The Literature Review

Communicative competence

It is of worldwide understanding that the main aim of language (LFE) education is to help the learners communicate with others freely. The process of communication is understood broadly as a transfer of one's thoughts to recipient/s/ with the help of the language learnt or known by them. This ability is referred to as communicative competence and can be defined as: "knowledge of not only if something is formally possible in a language, but also the knowledge of whether it is feasible, appropriate, or done in a particular speech community" (Richards, Schmidt 2002, p. 101). The term "communicative competence" is connected with the classical division between one's competence, which regards the knowledge of a language, and performance, which is understood as one's ability to make use of the actual language by the language user (Chomsky 1965). This approach was later successfully elaborated by Dell Hymes (1972).

Hymes's (1972) work on communicative competence was a reaction to Noam Chomsky's idea of linguistic competence. Hymes created and explained the acronym SPEAKING which stands for Setting, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms (of interaction and interpretation), and Genre. The last item, which Hymes recognized as particularly important, refers to the speech contexts in which communication can take place, so a person must have the ability to recognize: "when to speak, when not, what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner" (Hymes 1972, p. 277). In other words, Hymes (1972) defined communicative competence as one's ability to make use of their grammatical competence in various contexts when being engaged in different communicative situations.

Bottom-Up and Top-Down procedures

Mary Underwood (1989, p. 1), being an advocate of the Top-Down procedure, states that listening is an "activity of observing and trying to get

the meaning of something heard.” In this way she sees the skill as a complex process that allows our brain to build the meaning of the message one has heard as well as to recognize and (hopefully) understand the language. Howatt & Dakin (1974), in a far earlier attempt to define the act of listening, find the skill of listening as “an ability to identify and understand what other people said.” This process involves understanding the accent of the speaker; the pronunciation of the speaker’s grammar and lexis; and an ability to understand the meaning of what they are saying. Based on the definition of listening above, the students must be able to process what is heard while learning the skill of listening; and try to understand the meaning of words/phrases they heard. Hence, the listening skills influences one’s vocabulary, pronunciation, and the meaning of words or sentences. The two reverse procedures that help one recognize oneself in such processes can be called Bottom-Up (from the specific to the general) and Top-Down (from the general to the specific).

As Ardini (2015) explains, the Bottom-Up procedure consists in listening more carefully for details in grammar and the meaning of words. It is also related to the understanding of the information process by sound analysis, word meaning, or grammar. At the same time the top-down approach in listening involves the activity of building message contexts based on prediction, conclusion, purpose, and other relevant elements of knowledge. It refers to the use of schema or knowledge to understand a piece of information. The schema relates to the listeners’ own experiences about the heard topic. Thus, while the Bottom-Up procedure goes from language to meaning, the Top-Down procedure goes from meaning to language. As far as the skill of listening is concerned, in respect to the Bottom-Up procedure, the meaning appears as a result of appropriate adjustment of each of the elements just fished out from the message received by the message recipient. Normuminova (2022, p. 363) gives the following definition of the Bottom-Up learning activity: “[i]n the process of processing «bottom-top», the reader or listener focuses on individual words and phrases and achieves understanding by connecting these detailed elements together, thus creating a single whole.” In turn, the notion of meaning in the application of the Top-Down procedure is a result of what has just been heard; the learners make an attempt to understand the message while putting each of

the words/phrases together. In this way, the students make an attempt to reproduce a correct picture they have learnt to be functioning in a given language. Normuminova (2022, p. 364) puts it in the following way: “[d]uring top-down text processing, the reader or listener gets a general view of the passage to read or listen to.”

Dictogloss

Dictogloss is a classroom dictation activity where learners listen to a passage, note down keywords and then work together in small groups (or in pairs) to reconstruct a text. The technique was originally introduced by Ruth Wajnryb (1990) as an alternative method of teaching grammar. The original dictogloss procedure proposed by Wajnryb (1990) consists of four basic steps: /1/ warm-up (when the learners find out about the topic and do some preparatory vocabulary work); /2/ dictation (when the students listen to the text read at a normal speed by the lecturer and take fragmentary notes. The learners usually hear the text twice. The first time the teacher reads the text, the students just listen but do not take notes while in the second attempt, they do take notes); /3/ reconstruction (when the learners to work together in small groups to reconstruct the text they have heard); /4/ analysis and correction (when the students analyze and compare their text with the reconstructions of other groups of students and the original text and make additional corrections).

The proposed approach of teaching listening comprehension has many advantages, but only the most significant ones will be presented here. At first, Wajnryb (1990) notices that it requires a pair or, more frequently, a group work as it provides the students with a number of opportunities to develop peer co-operation and involvement in the given tasks. Secondly, the dictogloss processing enhances the learners' communicative competence as their speaking time-span is much longer than during traditional lessons. Their oral performance becomes naturally more productive because they are not disturbed by externally formed topic questions that are common while working with course-books. Thirdly, this reconstructive approach promotes learners'

autonomy. Students are expected to help each other recreate the text rather than wait for the teachers to depend on them to provide necessary pieces of information. The common analyses enable students to see where they have done well and where they need further improvement. What is more, students notice their linguistic shortages and develop strategies helping them solve the problems they have encountered. Last but not least, through doing the reconstructive exercises the learners learn how to manipulate grammar, vocabulary, other lexical items, or entire phrases and combine them to construct a new sentence.

Similar opinions that concern L2 teaching procedures could be found in the paper by Benati (2017). Although the main topic of discussion in the mentioned paper are the issues connected with input and output processes, the paper author stresses the fact that the whole process of L2 teaching not only strengthens both the input and the output activities, but also evidently speeds up the language acquisition processes when the groups are not too numerous. The learners can faster notice and – when appropriately guided – solve the oncoming linguistic problems, if only they have not been grouped in too numerous groups of students. Not only could the learners learn how to correctly apply many grammatical aspects and/or discover semantic differences between certain seemingly related expressions, but also the whole process of L2 communication looks much more fluent. As for the procedures related to the teaching of the skill of listening, the paper author seems to fully accept the ideas presented by Vandergrift and Goh (2012), who strongly indicated the importance of the skill for non-native L2 students as far as their future harmonious development of L2 communication is concerned. Similar to Wajnryb (1990), the author believes that it is mostly the procedures based on effective work in small groups that may effectively help L2 learners develop their personal level of self-efficacy and – in this way – limit their anxiety against active involvement in L2 message production.

Methods

The principal aim of the research was to find answers to two research questions: /1/ whether there can be found a difference in the process

of teaching listening comprehension with the help of a particular earlier-selected processing; and /2/ whether the application of each of the three procedures specified above may be help to the learners' development of their speaking skill in a more effective way. As for the first research question, it was hypothesized that the students improve their oral production through practicing listening skills with the help of each of the teaching methods, but the one entailing dictogloss processing would turn to be the most effective. As for the second research question, it was hypothesized that the application of each of the three procedures would add to the development of the speaking skill; however, similarly to the previous assumption, it was believed that the process of dictogloss introduction (in class 6) would turn to be the most effective.

Participants and procedures

In this study 3 experimental groups of students were involved. The first one, designed to follow the Bottom-Up approach, consisted of 25 students (class 4); the second one, following the Top-Down approach, also counted 25 students (class 5); and the third one, consisting of 22 students (class 6), was expected to follow the Dictogloss processing. All the participants were Polish with the similar cultural as well as linguistic background in each of the groups and all of them attended the same Cracow-based primary school. Both the performance of the experimental procedures and the collection of the data took place at the end of the fall semester 2020/2021.

The experiment started with the speaking pre-tests carried out in each group. The pre-test for the experimental groups A, B and C consisted of two parts and lasted for about eight minutes. All fourth-grade learners (group A) were supposed to answer easy general questions about their personal information. Grade five students (Group B) were shown a picture with people on the beach who were busy doing different activities. The students were expected to give responses to two questions that were connected with the distributed picture. Finally, grade six students (Group C) were presented with a map essential for giving directions and asked to comment on two questions related to the given plan of the city.

The main body of the experiment lasted for about two months. During this time each group was practicing listening skills and was taught using different methods of learning listening, adjusted to each class by us. Grade four was taught with the help of the Bottom-Up method, the students of grade five worked with the help of the Top-Down method, whereas these of grade six with the help of Dictogloss. All three experimental groups followed the school curriculum but all the listening exercises found in their course-books were done with the help of different technological tools. Every listening activity found in the course-book was aided by using an mp3 player, laptops, multimedia, the interactive whiteboard, a digital projector and/or a TV screen. All other aural exercises along with the authentic materials were distributed as homework and shared with the learners via the Internet through online register.

The expected students' progress was checked by carrying out the oral post-tests in each experimental group. The post-tests remained the same as pre-tests among the classes in order to get the most accurate and comparable data. The students were assessed with the help of the Evaluation Chart which had been prepared by us earlier for the sake of pre-tests and which followed the indications proposed by Harris (1969), later modified by Snoder and Reynolds (2018). It contained the four elements (Pronunciation, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Fluency), each of them counting 5 points maximum. There could be achieved 20 points maximum summing up all the categories.

Research findings

As the process of the experiment was introduced, a pre-test in all groups was carried out. It was adjusted to the level of each of the grade separately, according to their level of linguistic advancement. The results showed that – out of the 20 points in total – the average score of Bottom-Up group was 12 points, of the Top-Down one – 13 points and of the Dictogloss one – 12 points. The groups then occurred to be homogeneous among themselves what is presented below.

Subsequently, these 3 experimental groups were involved in a two-month-long experimental treatment. It was the fall school term

2020/2021. Each of the experimental groups was taught the skill of the listening comprehension with the help of a different processing described above. The same didactic material covered two units. All the procedures were backed up by the use of modern technology.

Table 1. Pre-test and post-test results of all the experimental groups

| Group | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Mean difference |
|-------|----------|----------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------|
| | mean | std. deviation | mean | std. deviation | |
| A | 2,56 | 0,84 | 3,25 | 0,81 | 2,90 |
| B | 2,94 | 1,06 | 3,58 | 1,05 | 3,26 |
| C | 3,20 | 1,04 | 3,95 | 0,92 | 3,58 |

Source: own research.

Finally, each group had to undergo the oral post-test which consisted of the same amount of questions and tasks. The results showed that the average score of the Bottom-Up group was 13 points, of Top-Down group – 14 points and of the Dictogloss group – also 14 points (out of 20 points in total). It could be seen that each of the groups did a small progress.

The ANOVA-based statistical calculations, as well as the results of *t*-tests carried out in order to get the answer to the first research question, i.e. whether appropriately performed practice of listening comprehension may enhance students' results of the speaking skill, gave mixed answers to this research question. First of all, due to small and hardly noticeable progress the answers to this question could not be found. The *t*-test results between the three groups appeared to be negative, what means that any of the approaches delivered when teaching listening comprehension may appear to be equally effective (or effective-less).

Table 2. The increase of knowledge in all groups in comparison with pre- and post-tests

| Group A (Bottom-Up) | | | | | |
|---------------------|----------|----------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Checked element | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Increase of knowledge |
| | mean | std. deviation | mean | std. deviation | |
| Grammar | 2,41 | 1,15 | 3,32 | 1,02 | 0,91 |
| Fluency | 2,45 | 0,94 | 2,95 | 0,82 | 0,50 |
| Vocabulary | 2,59 | 0,98 | 3,41 | 0,98 | 0,82 |
| Pronunciation | 2,77 | 0,85 | 3,50 | 0,94 | 0,73 |
| Mean score | 2,56 | 0,84 | 3,25 | 0,81 | 0,69 |

| Group B (Top-Down) | | | | | |
|--------------------|----------|----------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Checked element | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Increase of knowledge |
| | mean | std. deviation | mean | std. deviation | |
| Grammar | 2,82 | 1,11 | 3,50 | 1,20 | 0,68 |
| Fluency | 2,86 | 1,25 | 3,36 | 1,23 | 0,50 |
| Vocabulary | 2,77 | 1,13 | 3,73 | 0,96 | 0,96 |
| Pronunciation | 3,27 | 1,05 | 3,68 | 1,10 | 0,41 |
| Mean score | 2,94 | 1,07 | 3,58 | 1,05 | 0,64 |

| Group C (Dictogloss) | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------|----------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Checked element | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Increase of knowledge |
| | mean | std. deviation | mean | std. deviation | |
| Grammar | 3,00 | 1,13 | 3,82 | 1,15 | 0,82 |
| Fluency | 3,09 | 1,16 | 3,77 | 1,08 | 0,68 |
| Vocabulary | 3,27 | 1,17 | 4,14 | 0,92 | 0,87 |
| Pronunciation | 3,45 | 1,08 | 4,14 | 0,81 | 0,69 |
| Mean score | 3,20 | 1,04 | 3,95 | 0,92 | 0,75 |

Source: own research.

However, the results related to the second research question, concerning the ways individual components applied when teaching listening comprehension may turn to be of highest help for the learners' skill of speaking revealed partly correct assumption of the earlier hypothesis. After examining the data based upon the contents of the same amount of the teaching material (two units), it was found that the level of highest improvement could be found among the students taught with the help of either Dictogloss, or Bottom-Up groups ($R = 0.66$); the Pearson's correlation coefficient for the third Top-Down group was evidently much lower ($R = 0.54$). As for the individual language components developed when practicing listening comprehension with the help of each of the procedures it was found that both Bottom-Up and Dictogloss processing helped increase the vocabulary of the students in the same way ($R = 0.69$), with evident drop in respect of the Top-Down one ($R = 0.58$).

Conclusions and Limitations

The findings and calculations connected with the *t*-tests showed that all of the methods of teaching the skill of listening applied by us turned mildly beneficial for the participants when assessing their achievements from the point of view related to the skill of speaking. It was also found out that the two equally successful procedures which helped the students gain their oral post-test results at a little bit higher level were Dictogloss and Top-Down ones. After they were treated with any of these procedures throughout the whole experimental process' time, the participants' post-test results turned to be slightly better when compared to these taught with the help of the Bottom-Up processing.

It must also be mentioned that the application of modern technologies constituted a significant role in the process of the experiment. Its implementation and inevitable presence while practicing all the three approaches was contributory to the participants' final results.

As far as the study limitations are concerned one of them could be the amount of the participants assigned to each of the groups. They were not numerous due to fact that we had access to one elementary

school only. Hopefully, in the future it would be possible to include more numerous groups of the learners in order to obtain more extensive data.

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