

Reflections and Listening with Young Learners

Sharon Lin, Li Lin Elementary School

Reflections:

I had not been to England before Aug. 15, 2011. If there were no such program arranged, I would not have the opportunity to visit and join the workshop in England as an English teacher.

It's rather difficult for a mother and teacher to leave her young children at home just to attend a workshop without a good reason. Thank New Taipei City government for providing English teachers such a great opportunity to broaden our minds and to experience the English culture in real. I have been teaching English for 10 years but I had not been to England until Aug. 15, 2010. Staying in England for only two weeks is rather short, since there are still mountainous mount of things to explore.

The courses provided by the trainers there were fabulous; however, it was not only the in-class course itself benefits me but also the experience I gained outside the classroom benefits me. I had casual conversations during breakfast time with English teachers from other non-native speaking countries; I participated in watching Shakespeare's open theater in Robinson College; I had punting in River Cam; I had guided tours to two prestigious universities: Cambridge and Oxford; I had seen the Big Ben, the Parliament, the River Thames, the Buckingham Palace, the Harry Potter's platform...etc. I took the stagecoach and the underground. I made friends and I did some shopping in market, shops, and bookstores. I had tried my best to explore as much as I could, so I joined most of the activities at night, such as Pub quiz, Karaoke night, Folk songs concert, bookshop reception and guided tour to Cambridge.

The followings were the pictures I took during this trip:



Internaitonal breakfast



Noon picnic under a tree



Punting in River Cam



Open theater in Robinson College



exercise



Karaoke



Trip to Ely



London



Guided tour to Cambridge and Oxford

In addition, I was inspired by some lecturers in afternoon-workshops and I thought of the ideas I obtained during the lecture even after I came back here in Taiwan. Some of the ideas I learned answered my questions, since I always felt there was a far distance or gap between my students and myself, and now I realized that I need to make some change, that is, I should shift my focus from courses or course books to students themselves. Now I am aware that instead of pushing students to learn, we shall help our students be willing to learn. If a teacher could not touch her/his students' heart, it will be hard to help students to learn more, especially for young learners. Therefore, what I do now is to slow down my teaching pace a little bit. Before the class starts, I make sure whether students are ready for the class. Sometimes they were just having an exhausting Physical Education class before my class; sometimes they were scolded by the teacher in the previous class. I try to create a happy learning atmosphere for students by playing welcoming activities during the class. I try to do physical exercises with students whenever there is chance. I try to make students as the center, not the courses, not the books, not the teaching aids and props, and not the teachers. The above ideas are I gained from a workshop named "Creative Teaching" by Chaz Pugliese. I found that students are happier to see this change and they become more concentrated during the class.

Report: Listening with Young Learners

Listening to a foreign language is difficult. Take this trip to London for example. I

haven't been used to listening to English people speaking English and I found I was totally lost when I tried to inquire my network problems I had with the Porter's Lodge back in Homerton College. I felt so embarrassed when I couldn't understand what the man in Porter's Lodge said the second or the third time for what he was trying to say to me, although he finally understood my inquiry after my poor explanation. I started to doubt my listening ability after this embarrassment, although the man was so kind to say that it was not my fault and it's because he spoke too fast. In real life conversation, there are lots of incomplete utterances, fillers, connect speech, accents involved in which makes listening even more challenging. It's especially difficult for children because of their limited vocabulary, grammar and background knowledge. If teachers ask students "do you understand?" after listening for once, it surely will frustrate them and create bad experience for listening. We should not expect students to understand every word. Therefore, there are some techniques and procedures that teachers may take to develop students' listening skills.

First of all, according to Jean Brewster (2002), teachers should give the children confidence. Advance planning will give us a clear idea of what we expect the children to get from a piece of listening. The first time of listening could be to get a general idea of a story, the second could be to pick out the key words; the third could be able to recall the sequence of events. Teachers' gestures, tone of voice and visual aids will make children feel confident in listening.

Second, teachers can help children develop specific strategies for listening. "Intelligent guess work" is the important one. Children are used to drawing on their background knowledge to work out meaning. Teachers need to be aware of this so that they can ensure they provide support and raise children's awareness about the benefits of doing this. Some of the listening strategies include:

1. Predicting. Before learners listen to something, it is useful to encourage them to guess

what they think they will be listening to. Use pictures to encourage them to guess the topic, the language or some of the details. While they are in the middle of listening, stop to ask them what they think might come next.

2. Working out the meaning from context. Encourage students to use pictures, their general knowledge or the message itself to work out the meaning of unfamiliar words.

3. Recognizing discourse patterns and markers. Words such as first, then, finally, or but, and, so could give important signals about what is coming next.

4. Set a specific listening task: pre-listening activity, such as providing motivation and interest, build up a picture of useful background knowledge and introduce useful words, structures and concepts; while-listening activities, make students remain active by questioning them what happens next, and post-listening activities, such as producing a drawing and answer questions, could consolidate their listening comprehension.

In order to make listening an active, learning-focused process, there are repertoires of different activities that teachers can use in classroom as the following:

1. Write down the number of the text/pictures you hear. Teachers list six pictures with numbers from one to six and say the words on the pictures, and then let students write down the number of the pictures that they heard. The words on the pictures could be adjusted to sentences for higher level students.

2. Listening grid. Teachers say sentences for students to tick on the grid.

3. Listen and find. The activity here is “Washing line. The procedures are as below:

- Get two students to hold a length of rope between them like a washing line.
- Divide the class into two teams and get a representative of each team to come to the front.
- Teacher says, for example, please bring me a blue sock.
- The two representatives search their boxes to identify and take out the object concerned.

-The first one to hang it on the line is the winner and that team scores a point.

4. Listen and mime. The activity here is “Mime what happens.” Teachers invent a simple sequence of events about something that happens to the children and tell the events to the children and get them to respond by miming what happens.

5. Listen and arrange. The children are being asked to arrange a picture or diagram according to the information they hear. The children response physically to what they hear.

6. Listen and draw. Draw a simple picture on the board and ask the children to copy it or give out photocopies of the picture. Say sentences to describe the picture, e.g. the house is purple. Children color the picture following your instructions. Once the children have finished, either ask questions, e.g. what color is the house? or get children to describe the picture.

There are some “do” and “don’t” that teachers should keep in mind while doing listening activities:

Do	Don't
Let the listening be a listening.	Lost faith in your tasks, your materials or your students.
Have faith in your materials, yourself and your lesson.	Don't answer the Qs for them as soon as they become challenging.
Concentrate on Meaning first, even when you want to use the same text for language work later.	Get straight into the language, the text becomes meaningless and boring, and students will soon lose interest.
Allow the students to listen: #1- for gist/general understanding #2-for more detail #3-focus on even more detail/information	Focus on detail straight away

Do plan tasks that go from the general to the specific (general to specific)	
<p>Let the students listen more than once to complete the same task: listening is the most challenging of the skills:</p> <p>(i) Students can't do it at their own pace, stop and go back, as they can with reading;</p> <p>(ii) English is a time-stressed language, and this means that we don't always pronounce all the sounds in a word/sentence clearly: quite often English native speakers pronounce a schwa where the students might expect to hear a full vowel sound;</p> <p>(iii) Further features of connected speech make listening even more of a challenge.</p>	Put them on the spot by asking them "do you understand?" or, "have you got that?" after only letting them listen once.
Expose the students to language as is used in real life. Do include features of spoken language, such as: false starts, repetition, incomplete utterances, hesitations and fillers.	"Sanitize" language for the students. This makes it unnatural, and very unlike the language they'll need to understand when speaking to native speakers of English.
Provide a context and a Pre-listening stage that will activate the students' existing knowledge on the topic	Launch straight into the listening, telling students to just "listen and tell me what this is about!"

Do plan some work on connected speech in English: highlight the fact that in English we stress the important words that carry meaning, and as long as students can hear these, they're doing well, especially at lower levels. Be encouraging!	Just tell the students that "it's difficult, isn't it?"!-you're not sympathizing with them, merely encouraging them to doubt their abilities even more!
Include plenty of listening in your lessons!	Shy away from listening! The more we expose students to this, the better they get!

The followings are some useful ideas of listening activities in three stages:

1. Before Listening:

- relate to the students' lives/ personalize it
- relate to the students' predictions
- predict the content by reading the title
- students predict/brainstorm—Teacher elicits/feeds in necessary vocabulary to help understanding
- work on new words
- create interest

2. Listening for specific information or gist/general understanding

- reading between the lines:" why does X say...?"
- ...what happens next?
- improve on pronunciation
- students discuss photographs/pictures related to the topic

3. After listening

- put the picture in the right order
- put the story in the right order/jumbled up sentences

- choose the best title
- draw a timeline/graph/diagram/chart
- add to your picture/change your picture
- true/false questions
- multiple choice questions
- comprehension questions
- students write a reply to...(e.g. the author/singer)
- continue the dialogue between the characters
- students read/listen to identify stress, rhythm and intonation patterns
- students interview one of the characters
- students create own questions for other students in the class
- students role-play (parts of) the situation
- rewrite text from another character's point of view
- design posters relating to topic
- students design activities similar to examination questions
- have a discussion about what is in the text
- check if students' predictions were correct

The purpose of language learning is to communicate, and listening is the beginning of learning language. It is language teacher's job to help students develop listening skills by providing strategic support and enable students to communicate successfully. After learning many listening skills, procedures, activities and strategies, I will try to adapt those I learned into my class to help my students improving their listening, and now when I am doing lectures or telling stories to my students, I try to use visual clues, voice, tones, intonation, facial expression and gestures to help students understand the content. For developing students' listening skills, I take the following procedures to tell a story:

1. Choose a proper material. After teaching my current students for one year, now I know their levels of English and am able to choose the right books for them. If teachers choose books that beyond students' comprehension too much, it only creates more listening difficulties.
2. Before telling the story, I arouse students' interests by questioning them something about the title of the book and asking them to find some clues of the pictures on the cover of the book.
3. I relate the content or pictures of the book to students' life experience. This is used to scaffolding students' background knowledge to help them work out something they are not sure of.
4. I read the story out loud with various intonations, voices, facial expressions and gestures slowly and clearly; sometimes, with poses or high and low pitch to catch students' attention. I also observe students' responses to see if students can follow or not.
5. Whiling telling the story, I hold the book and sometimes indicate the picture of the characters in the book and ask students questions about the key characters, words, meanings to ensure their understanding. In addition, I try to remind or build the connection between characters, places or things in the story by asking students to repeat or go on with what they just heard. In order to sustain students' attention, I stop in the middle to ask them what they think might come next.
6. I use some techniques to get students involved in the story by inviting students to interact the repetitive lines in the picture book or clapping their hands when they hear certain sounds or words.
7. After finishing the story, I ask "who, where, what, when, why, how" questions for students to generate the general idea and some specific information of the story.
8. I retell the story with brief drawings or written key words on the blackboard to refresh

students' memory about the story.

9. Hand out each student the picture book that I just told and lead students to read the whole stories.

10. I then assign students to read different parts of the characters in the story and do role play or Reader Theater afterwards.

Reference

Brewster, J. 2002. *The primary English Teacher's Guide*: Person Education Limited.