

Constructivist approaches and strategies for improving the listening language skills

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Abstract

This article deals with activities to develop listening language skills in a context of authentic learning in the subject of English language in Kosovo schools. Looking into this issue we studied the relevant literature, used results of the visitations of English and Albanian language classes in 30 schools in Kosovo, and results of a questionnaire administered with 229 teachers of English language in ten Kosovo schools. Good practices observed during the visits organized in five American schools during the winter of 2015 have also been taken in consideration. The aim of the article, based on the findings of the quantitative and qualitative research in some 30 Albanian schools, is to identify and suggest learning activities in the classrooms that would help improve the development of student listening skills in the subject of English language. The suggestions can be generalized and used by teachers of the Albanian language as well. Within the integrated learning approach and the competence based curriculum framework which is being applied recently in Kosovo, the strategies suggested in this article can be used for the curriculum area of languages and communication.

Key words: *language skills, listening, authentic learning, constructivist approach.*

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Introduction

Listening skill is one of the four language skills for learning a language. Our research into the application of the listening skill in Kosovo school has shown that this skill has been applied only marginally and most often in a wrong way in Kosovo schools. While there are ample reading materials available to students from the school textbooks, and they are more or less, involved in writing activities (homework and descriptions of long texts are most preferred), and in speaking (with lots of issues that will be elaborated in another article), the listening activities and materials are either scarce (teachers and students rarely use English) or are used, more or less, in a wrong manner.

Lindsay Miller wonders why listening does not receive the needed attention in classes, knowing that listening is used most in everyday life¹. She refers to a study done by Burely-Allen where it was ascertained that "more than forty percent of our daily communication is done through listening, thirty-five percent through speaking, sixteen percent through reading and only nine percent through writing².

On the other hand, if we rely on the practices observed in the classroom and responses of the teachers to the questionnaire (on the topic the applications of constructivist approaches in the classroom), then we should logically expect from students to have developed only *the skill of passive listening*. This is primarily so if we take in consideration the time they spend listening passively to their teachers in the classroom. Teachers, in

¹ Lindsay Miller. 2003. Developing Listening Skills with Authentic Materials. ELC 689: English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Assessment Continuing and Professional Studies, UMBC

² Burely-Allen, M. 1995. *Listening: The forgotten skill* . New York: John Wily & Sons, Inc .

principle, are more preoccupied with what they have to say in the classroom and, as a result, the development of student listening skills and their active participation is sidelined and becomes second-hand. Majority of applied linguistics researchers agree that a possible sequence for learning skills is: (i) listening, (ii) speaking, (iii) reading, and (iv) writing. It goes without saying that in most cases skills are acquired as integrated, but there is a general consent that the input skills (listening and reading) precede articulation skills (speaking and writing). The lack of listening exercises and materials for identification of information, for deep understanding and for communication can result in the lack of a sound foundation for developing further knowledge in English language for every student. Building on previous knowledge is one of the key constructivist principles and, consequently, the classes which do not have a sequenced and balanced approach in learning the skills cannot be considered as constructivist classes and learning.

Theoretical perspective

Rhoda Maxwell³ thinks that in order to develop listening skills in students, initially, we have to deal with three basic misconceptions:

1. It is thought that listening cannot be learnt and that students, by nature, know how to listen and be good listeners.
2. It is thought the listening skill and attentive listening is the same thing; consequently, it is thought that listening happens all by itself.

³ Maxwell, Rhoda, and Mary Jordan Meiser. 2005. *Teaching English in Middle and Secondary Schools*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson / Merrill Prentice Hall, p. 123.

3. As it often happens, disagreeing is confused with absence of listening; teachers tell their students that "they are not listening" in cases when students do not believe, do not agree or cannot accept something.

All these aspects constitute the difference between active listening as part of a two-way communication and passive listening as part of a one-way communications.

However, after the approach of language learning switched from behaviorist, eclectic and grammar approach to the communicative one, the understanding of language and verbal and non-verbal communication have gained in importance. This because the criterion for language competence is production rather than reproduction.

In one of the articles on the topic of listening and speaking, Jack Richards⁴ (Richards 2008, 1-20) states that the attitude towards listening skill in the frame of English language learning has evolved in the last five decades. Initially, listening was seen only as a process of identifying and distinguishing contractions, words, and linking words in sentences. Recent views are based on cognitive psychology by introducing the concept of bottom-up and top-down approaches (which will be elaborated below) and turning the focus towards the role of prior knowledge schematic structuring during the process of understanding and interpreting the listening text. Thus, the attention has switched (i) from the text to the listener, (ii) from the process of *identification to the process of understanding*, and (iii) from the decontextualized memorization of definitions to *developing language competence* of students. Richards then describes the application of the two approaches through the listening skill.

⁴ Richards, Jack C. 2008. *Teaching Listening and Speaking - From Theory to Practice*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne : Cambridge University Press, p. 1-20.

John Field⁵ states that the development of a listening activity consists of several stages: pre listening, during the listening, and post listening. Field also highlights the importance of authentic materials for the development of listening skills: "Another area to practice listening seems to be the increased use of authentic materials. *An advantage to which they often refer is that such materials provide numerous illustrations of hesitation, wrong beginning, filled in or empty pauses, etc., which characterize the natural speech*".

Different approaches and strategies for the development of listening skill

The bottom-up approach is an identification and decoding approach. Students listen to the text and, based on their vocabulary and grammar knowledge, process and analyze one after the other, sounds, words, phrases, sentences and the entire text during the decoding process, to grasp the meaning of the text. In order to be successful in the bottom-up approach, students need to know words and grammar of the language. Such are most of the practices in schools nowadays, including the activities such as: dictation, listening, identification, repetition, questions and answers after the exercise, etc. Usually such exercises are aimed at finding the structure of a sentence, tense, place, positive or negative forms, key words carrying meaning, types of words, order of actions in a sentence, etc. Such an approach is supported by the majority of the textbooks in use and favored by teachers because it does not require much involvement besides following the exercises in the textbook. The questions put forth are mainly factual and do not require much

⁵ Field, John. 1998. "Skills and strategies: towards a new methodology for listening." *ELT Journal Volume 52/2* (Oxford University Press).

elaboration, concentration and attention by teachers. For example, the sentence *Students have been waiting for their teacher* (Albanian: *Nxënësit po e presin mësuesin*), is accompanied by questions such as: what verb tense is it? What type of sentence is it? Is the action complete or incomplete? What is the subject? And so on.

On the other hand⁶, "the top-down approach refers to the context and the use of prior knowledge to grasp the meaning of a message. While the bottom-up approach moves from language to meaning, the top-down approach starts from meaning to achieve language. The knowledge sought could be information, situational or contextual knowledge and schemes, different paradigms and general relations students have about the topic". For example, students listen to the sentence: "*National elections were held yesterday in Albania*". (Albanian: *Zgjedhjet kombëtare u mbajtën dje në Shqipëri*). The key word is *elections*. Based on the broader context, prior knowledge, and established schemes regarding the elections in Albania, students can react with questions:

Who won? Were the elections fair? Did many people go to the polls? Is this good or not for Albania? For the European integration process? What about Kosovo? Which politicians won? What is the importance of democratic elections? Such questions and follow up discussions build up the context for subsequent exercises on this topic. The top-down approach starts from the scheme and general knowledge to elicit the meaning of the text and to develop the language skills of students. Through this approach, the teacher helps students to:

⁶ Richards, Jack C. 2008. *Teaching Listening and Speaking - From Theory to Practice*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne : Cambridge University Press, p. 7.

- Use key words to create the scheme of the listening discourse (text)
- Elicit the context of the text
- Identify and understand the role and the aims of participants
- Identify the causes and effects of actions
- Identify unstated details in the text
- Foresee and formulate questions regarding the text.

In top – down activities students develop skills in order to:

- Think and formulate a set of questions regarding the text (and then listen whether those questions have been addressed)
- To compile a list of things they know about a topic and a list of new things they would like to learn (and then listen to find out and compare their expectations)
- Read the words of one speaker and anticipate the answer of the other speaker (then listen to find out the answer)
- Read few issues, points, highlights which are to be mentioned in a text, then listen for verification
- Read a part of a story, anticipate how it will continue or end and then listen for verification
- Read news headlines, anticipate the news content, and then listen for verification.

In general, the top-down approach encourages the use of resource material resulting in authentic learning, while the bottom-up approach starts from language material by imposing an analytical and descriptive approach. Experienced teachers, with proper *professional capital*, to use Hargreaves and Fullan's terminology⁷, will combine both approaches, based on the needs

⁷ Andy Hargreaves, Michael Fullan . New York: Teachers College Press. 2012. *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*. New York: Teachers College Press.

of students. Assessing the needs and wishes of students can be done during the planning or the implementation of a class hour (always taking into account the characteristics of students) and with active participation of students. In this way, the autonomy and the responsibility of students will increase regarding their own success and the class hour.

In order to illustrate the approaches discussed above, we have made an adjustment by combining the stages of listening activities in class by Field and the Richards concept of top-down and bottom-up approaches through the elaboration of the topic of national elections. The following table presents different aspects of these two approaches and their possible application in a lesson.

Topic: national elections⁸

Phase / activity / approach	Bottom - up	Top - down
Before the listening	Review of the vocabulary on democratic elections Forming and using the Future Tense	General knowledge on elections Knowledge on political parties and election system in Albania Their opinions regarding the importance of elections in Albania Favorite politicians Describing the event Compiling pre-election speeches
During the listening	Understanding words Using verb forms Structural exercises Meaning of the text listened	Anticipating the continuation of the text Verification of assumptions from the first phase

⁸ Adapted by Jack A. Richards, Bottom up and Top down processing in teaching listening, p. 4-10.

	Repeating specific parts	Students compile questions about the text listened Students compile questions about the motives of candidates Students fill in the blank words in the text (main verb, modal or auxiliary forms);
After the listening	Revision of new words Description of sentences in future tense Reading out loud speeches or a text Lecture and repetition of the tense verb form.	Drafting pre-election speeches Analysis of the effects of elections Analysis of the election system Analysis of protagonists and their motives Compiling the list of election promises Using verb forms The meaning of verb forms

Jack Richards's concept of the bottom-up and top-down approaches have served as a model to compare the way how a class hour has been processed in the classes observed in Kosovo schools. The activities observed were focused mainly on the bottom-up approach and with relatively superficial involvement of students who could not produce deeper thinking and sustainable learning. Thus, students were rarely or not involved at all in the anticipating activities, in the analysis and compiling questions that would activate their imagination and high level thinking. Surprisingly, it happened in an Albanian language class, during the elaboration of "Gjahu i Malsorëve" (Highlanders' hunting) by Kristoforidhi, where students got involved in active listening, in anticipating the continuation of the story, in verifying information, in deep understanding and in drafting questions at varying levels of complexity which were carefully calibrated by the teacher. However, this class was an

exception and not at all a rule out of six observed classes where listening material had been developed.

Few techniques for listening activities

Maxwell and Meiser⁹ refer to a list compiled by Thomas Devine (1982, 5) suggesting a number of listening activities. We consider that we reformulate them and use them as learning outcomes for students, but also as teaching objectives. Therefore, the task of teachers is to help students to:

- follow verbal instructions attentively
- rephrase accurately a verbal message
- follow a sequence in the development of an event, in describing a character and in presenting arguments by a speaker;
- understand how the first meanings (connotative) and the generated meanings (denotative)
- understand the meaning elicited from the context
- listen attentively to grasp important details
- listen in order to grasp the main ideas
- distinguish new material and contents from the old ones
- distinguish relevant material and contents from irrelevant ones
- anticipate outcomes
- draw conclusions
- identify and summarize the main idea, and
- link the main idea of the speaker with his/her own idea.

⁹ Maxwell, Rhoda, and Mary Jordan Meiser. 2005. *Teaching English in Middle and Secondary Schools*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson / Merrill Prentice Hall, fq. 124

For effective listening to take place, the authors¹⁰ consider non-verbal behaviour to be of critical importance and suggest that during a conversation it is important to:

- Keep a natural eye contact
- Nod in token of approval
- Lean a little bit forward
- Maintain a pleasant facial expression
- Face the speaker
- Keep our arms open and not folded.

Numerous authors suggest various approaches for the development of the listening skills, with the common denominator being the fact that students and their active participation should be at the focus and that new knowledge should build on current knowledge.

Listening skills and authentic learning

“Authentic learning is commonly focused on the real world complex problems and in finding solutions for the same by using role playing, problem solving activities, case studies and by participating in communities of practice. ... Authentic learning goes beyond content to apply multi-disciplinary approaches, diverse perspectives, ways of application, habits and community”¹¹.

Authentic learning can take different shapes in classroom practices: this can be a well thought story about student experiences, a problem identified by the students themselves, a

¹⁰ Maxwell, Rhoda, and Mary Jordan Meiser. 2005. *Teaching English in Middle and Secondary Schools*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson / Merrill Prentice Hall, fq. 91

¹¹ Lombardi, Marilyn M. 2007. "Authentic Learning for the 21st Century: An Overview." Edited by Diana G. Oblinger. *ELI Paper* (EDUCAUSE) 1

professional or a live person from a story, reading of passages or poetry by an actor, recorded materials from real life situations, live spoken language instead of reading passages detached from reality, simple illustrations and parables about complex situations and so on. Authentic learning should be accompanied by other real life and authentic materials. For instance, instead of using an imaginary and improvised text about political elections, one should prefer listening to or reading an original speech from the election campaigns taken from printed or electronic media.

Listening skills and research findings

In the context of authentic learning, it was a surprise in one of the observed classes that a teacher managed to avoid using and discussing authentic materials in class where the theme of elections was being taught to students (in efforts to learn about comparison of adjectives). The teacher managed to avoid reading or playing authentic election materials, which were abundantly available at that time of pre-election campaign in Kosovo. Even timid efforts by students to remind the 'disciplined' teacher of the ample promises 'on the air' did not impress the teacher. This because any such activity would mark moving away from the school book unit and from the decontextualized top-down approach. This in turn meant that students would not be able to identify themselves with politicians and compare adjectives by drafting and reading political speeches to their peers - imaginary political rivals. The opportunity was lost thus for presentation, listening and discussion of authentic materials and for active participation of students; all this in order to stay loyal to the course set by the school textbook (Exploring English for grade seven).

Useful data on the utilization of constructivist approaches in developing listening skills in students were collected from qualitative (observations and interviews) and quantitative research (questionnaires with 229 teachers of English language). If we summarized teachers' responses on most frequent teaching and learning activities in their classes, that is activities that most of them (minimum 180 of 229) declared practicing *always* or *often*¹², then a typical class of English language arts would look like this: teacher instruction (125 *always*, 88 *often*), discussion (111, 85), classroom activities (114, 85), reading aloud (102, 90), review (84, 106), and homework (120, 67). A class like this features strong elements of a traditional (behaviorist and innatist) class. Activities containing authentic materials and learning are not among the classes most frequently practiced by the respondent teachers. Only classroom activities and classroom discussion have elements that would reflect a constructivist approach in teaching and learning English language in observed classes. Key activities that are more closely related to development of listening skills (teacher instruction and reading aloud) result in superficial and decontextualized learning. Project based learning (22 *always*, 85 *often*), student self-evaluation (49, 96), student presentation (46, 103), and peer assessment (55, 98), which carry characteristics of the top-down approach in developing listening skills, are practiced in average 30 % less than the more traditional approaches.

When these results are triangulated against those obtained from the qualitative research (observations and interviews), then even the discussion activities (that showed high frequency in the questionnaire) should be taken with reservations: observations have shown that the discussion is more often practiced as a

¹² Likert scale for this question consisted of five levels: always, often, sometimes, rarely and never.

teacher centered activity, focusing around a couple of more active students, built around closed and factual (yes/no, who? When?) questions, and with very little thinking time to respond allowed to students. At the same time, *classroom activities* (also among the most frequent answers in the questionnaire) proved to mean differently to respondents compared to the concept of student lead activities in the class. In observed classes, classroom activities meant filling in exercises in the textbook more than original learning activities that would best meet student learning needs.

In observed classes, most of the listening activities served the purpose of developing other language skills. Only three (out of 30 observed classes) used adequate technology (players and computers) to listen to and process materials provided in the school textbooks; in two cases teachers used songs they had prepared (not given in the textbook) for more meaningful learning. In these two classes listening materials served well to achieve the set learning outcomes. However, there were again some issues with the way questions were used that did not allow for meaningful learning.

In most of other observed classes, teachers were content with activities to identify new words, grammar forms and sentence parts. Exercises focused around filling the gaps, matching words, setting the rhymes, and so on. During the reading activities students engaged in listening activities that did allow for sustainable learning: the teacher or students would read paragraphs and then students would answer a limited number of mainly closed questions related to the passage. These activities could potentially help students develop listening skills; however, there were a number of flaws such as inaccurate pronunciation both by teachers and students, flawed intonation, untimely and unplanned application of translation, and so on.

Asked to five reasons for not using a CD player in a listening exercise, one of the teachers responded that they did not have one; when reminded that the school principal had informed us that they did have two CD players in their school, the teacher said that they were broken lately. The same teacher read the reading passage three times even after having complained of having a sore throat to the observer. As a matter of fact, most of the teachers complained about the lack of working conditions, even though a player can be purchased at a relatively low price (of 40-50 Euro) in the market.

Conclusion:

Listening skills activities are probably the least represented learning activities in the observed classes; this applies also to activities observed at lower level courses (grades five and six), where one expects to witness more language input than language output activities. As a matter of fact, there are listening activities present in all classes, but these are not carefully planned, purposeful and coherent learning efforts targeted at developing student active listening skills.

This article identifies a number of teaching and learning strategies applied to develop student listening skills in the curricular area of languages and communication in Kosovo. It also outlines challenges and difficulties witnessed during a wider qualitative and quantitative research into the application of constructivist approaches in teaching and learning of English language in Kosovo schools. Based on the challenges and issues identified during the research, the article outlines a number of constructivist teaching and learning strategies that could assist Kosovo teachers of English language in their efforts to improve student active listening skills. Rather than an exhaustive list of

strategies, the suggested techniques cover a wider range of strategies starting from more general and paradigmatic (top-down and bottom-up) approaches to more concrete teaching and learning strategies. The later are rather exemplary teacher activities that can serve to develop student listening skills for deeper understanding and improved communication in the field of languages in general, and in learning of English as a foreign language in Kosovo schools, in particular. The research has also found that just as important as utilization of new teaching and learning strategies is the provision of educational technologies and materials to Kosovo teachers and their training to make the best use of the same (that will be addressed in another article).

Development of the listening skills is important not only for the identification and understanding of sounds, words, sentences, but also as part of the communication skills and competences. The language listening skill is critical according to the meaningful input theory of Stephen Crashen¹³ in the process of foreign language learning. There are listening materials and content present in every English language class as produced by both the teacher and students. However, rather than systematic and purposeful activities, these are spontaneous and side-products of activities directed to other language skills. As such, these are not very qualitative materials, often resulting in inadequate synaptic connections (to use an expression from brain based learning and educational neuro-science) that will sooner or later need to be corrected. The end result is unsustainable and inefficient learning (more efforts are need for the same learning to take place). The ad-hoc nature of listening content and materials is not the only defect witnessed during the observed

¹³ Crashen, Stephen. 1982. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Los Angeles: Pergamon Press Inc. p. 64-76

classes: most of the planned and structured materials also suffer from numerous deficiencies. Usually they are not well sequenced and in coherence with other materials and learning activities, they are not well prepared and so on. All this results in not very attractive and in flawed learning.

Finally, teacher and English language departments in schools should turn their focus to meaningful listening activities as the best way to building listening and communication skills in their students. This will in turn serve to improve teaching and learning of languages in Kosovo schools and will contribute to improving the communication in general in and out of schools. Just as important is for the teachers to focus on facilitating authentic learning experiences among students by providing authentic learning materials and situations. This calls for a meaningful shift away from using only improvised language materials currently made available in the English language school textbooks. Abundant language materials are available online and in electronic and printed media with authentic language for various situations. This article provides a number of teaching and learning strategies on how to make best use of such materials to facilitate authentic and sustainable learning by students.

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