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Listening as productive skills: Reinventing classroom tasks

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ABSTRACT

The article revisits the role played by listening skills in second language learning by challenging the perception of listening as a receptive skill. It argues that listening can be made productive by incorporating drama in classroom tasks to bring out more productive features of learning. To instantiate the implementation of drama, a listening activity is proposed with a framework. The article opens a new dialogue in the scholarly characterisation of language skills through re-visualising what learners can perform during listening tasks as well as how this performance can stretch our conventional thinking about the nature of language practice.

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1. Why rethink listening?

This article draws scholarly attention to the fact that listening is not simply about receiving information. Instead, it can be an active process of highly demanding cognitive processing and highly responsive strategies. Arguably, receiving and responding are two interdependent steps in everyday communication. While the former may be passive, the latter is active. One cannot simply separate these and attribute the first step to the nature of the entire listening experience. This is because the ultimate purpose of listening is not just to retrieve data but to act upon that data. Such action can be public verbalisation, but it can also be speech in the mind (inner speech), self-whispering (private speech), and personal sharing with a peer (insider speech) (see, for example, [1]). Our experience and observation show that when many learners listen, they do not simply 'keep their mouth shut' but often exhibit proactive behavior such as murmuring words, writing them down, sharing them briefly with a peer, asking a question in writing or speaking, and recycle some of these actions where needs arise. In such a genuine environment of communication, listening in many cases shift from comprehension to acting upon comprehension. For the above reasons, the fact that listening is considered a passive, receptive skill, as opposed to active, productive speaking and writing skills, has unfavourably simplified the complexity of this area with all its mental processing demands on learners. It has been increasingly acknowledged that listening comprehension plays a major role in facilitating language learning. The development of effective listening skills should be viewed not only as a valuable process but also as an inherent, indispensable part of speaking and writing.

The challenge of listening performance is that it places pressure on learners not only to pay full attention to and process information in a timely manner but also to utilise an array of functions such as planning, monitoring, inferencing, imagery-elaboration, summarisation, repetition, resourcing, note-taking, and so on. The application of strategy requires a high degree of intellectual consciousness and goal orientation which entails working memory, organising words in clusters, and tackling unfamiliar linguistic data. The connection between the purpose of listening and a range of skills being employed is an essential factor in listening ability. Listening takes on a complex nature as it requires learners to weave multiple components into a set of meanings. This practice is also known as input processing which falls into three categories namely metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and

social-affective strategies (see, for example, [2], [3]). Cognitive strategies are utilised to process, understand, collect, and remember knowledge. Metacognitive strategies are for administering and assisting intellectual procedures as well as for handling obstacles through listening. Social-affective listening strategies are applied to procure the assistance of others/interlocutors to assist understanding and to facilitate students to handle negative feelings such as anxiety. The third type is also known as the cooperative listening technique which is best used for teaching a group of learners. Listening plays a strategic, embedded role in monitoring language and developing communication strategies. It has been acknowledged that strategic competence is the ability to make conversational plans and compensate for difficulties in verbal communication [4]. There is a flow of logical development in attentive listening, observing others' communication, engaging in self-directed speech, and negotiating all of these in the performance of language use [5]. So far, the relationship between silent observation and strategy development has rarely been a concern in second language acquisition research [6]. Although there are, admittedly, learners who cope with listening receptively, it would be unfair to treat all listeners as submissive recipients of information.

2. Challenging the receptive-productive dichotomy

This is not the first article with an attempt to think of listening skills with a proactive capacity, but it would be a pioneering conversation that proposes ideas for the design of listening activities to assert such a capacity. Some scholars have acknowledged the logical flow between effective listening and the development of communication skills (see, for example, [7]). For instance, Noor and Toh maintain that learners who encounter the challenge of speaking skills often are those who suffer from lacking adequate listening skills [8]. A nominal amount of recent discourse has examined the notion of proactive listening by situating it within communication practice. Research conducted by [9] explores the relationship between the effect of listening on successful communication. The findings suggest that when learners are explicitly taught communication strategies, listening can become more effective by directly supporting language production. According to Dimoski, proactive listening enjoys more conditions to happen when auditory transcripts are provided to students for output rehearsal [10]. For example, after a listening comprehension task, learners would then use the script for reading aloud or a picture to practice roleplay. When silent comprehension and verbal practice flow together in the same activity, they combine efforts to reduce the dichotomy between listening and speaking. In other words, it is through strategic interaction with the auditory source that transforms the conventional model of what Björkman [11] refers to as 'monologic events' whereby listening is no more than a passive process of receiving input for comprehension.

Another component that can be incorporated into every listening activity is a follow-up reflection stage in which learners discuss what strategies they have employed to obtain the most from the experience. Such strategies may include noting down highly noticeable words, making gestures, doodling images or a mind chart, asking the teacher to pause the recording or replay certain segments of it, and so on. Such intensive use of tactics together with a discussion on them in the class would make listening highly communicative and not at all receptive anymore. The above-mentioned study by Dimoski et al. tapped into this productive listening capacity when it was organised for students, after the listening event, to produce a written reflection on how they thought about their learning process [10]. It was through such reflection that students discovered for themselves how much a listening experience can turn into communicative awareness, such as when they develop the need to use gestures in conversations, or when they repeat expressions in the recording to consolidate new language knowledge. In other words, it is through discussing subject content, articulating language knowledge, and sharing mate-cognitive strategies that make listening no longer a mere receptive task. Arguably, these are not follow-up steps after listening, but they represent the main components of the listening process itself.

The emphasis on comprehension as the sole function of listening is highly questionable and the role of listening in verbal communication is more cohesive than we know. There is mutual integration among listening and other micro-skills, namely speaking, reading, and writing make up authentic communication [12]. Listening provides the indispensable linguistic, social, and cultural exposure that drives learners towards language acquisition [13]–[15]. Moreover, being the most frequently used language facility, listening connects input directly with output to shape communication in language learning [16], [17]. Half a century ago, research conducted by Mehrabian [18] already showed that the role of *listening* to speech in decoding a message plays only 45% in real-world communication while during 55% of the communication time, one simply does not listen but observes nonverbal

gestures, that is, receiving meaning from silence rather than from speech. This means that listening alone, in many cases, does not allow one to receive sufficient information. It also means that a major part of one's receptive mechanism is not based on listening but on gesture. Although listeners may not talk much, their non-verbal language exerts influence over the direction of a conversation. Because of this, it would be misleading to assume that a listener only 'receives' information: they deliver information during the listening process. In the meanwhile, speakers do not deliver their message independently but often receive signals from listeners to adapt their speech.

During a lesson that we once observed, the teacher said: 'Let me give you some work to do at home'. After saying this, he looked at everybody who said nothing and continued: 'Well, don't complain. It's important and I'll consider giving you less work than usual, alright?'. The emerging question is: Did students merely receive information from the teacher? Did the teacher merely provide information? Students without having to talk delivered their responsive information back to the teacher, who then took it into account and modified his speech. Without having to say a word, the class actively influenced what the teacher continued to say. Based on this incident, we cannot assume that when listening, one receives data and does not change the nature of the conversation. The rest of the literature, unfortunately, overlooks the above reality and maintains that to listen is no more than to receive and comprehend. It is commonly assumed that listeners neither produce language [19]; nor change the nature of conversation either [20]. Listening, thus, is often narrowed down to the domain of comprehensible input [21], [22] whereby learners receive vocabulary, listen to materials and complete the answer only to demonstrate understanding [23]–[25]. Listener practice, in this way, is reduced to a passive role that stays outside of communication. The maximum that listers can do is to be exposed to the diversity of materials [17], [26], [27], without any feedback influence over them. By and large, listening has been perceived as having little or nothing to do with the output process in second language acquisition [19], [28], [29]. Listeners do not express any communicative value. By not making utterances, they neither influence interaction nor make output happen [8], [19], [30]. Besides such a passive role, listeners' task is also subject to many constraints. For example, listeners often struggle with unpredictable obstacles such as failing to recognise words or losing track of auditory signals [20], [31]. Before we argue further for listening to be reconsidered as part of learners' productive mechanism, let us turn our attention to what productive skills might comprise. Based on that understanding, we will then decide whether and how listening can meet those requirements.

3. Embracing listening in productive characteristics

Historically, listening was established as a receptive micro-skill during the late 1970s. In the 1970s and 1980s when form and meaning had a clear-cut distinction (see, for example, [32]), listening adopted a motor-receptive stance with strategies that handle technical aspects of language input such as sound recognition, synthesising details and inferring, among others [33], [34]. Drawn from such practical conceptualisation, listening and speaking were divided into two distinctive operations. That is to say, the idea of receptive and productive were borne out of a polarising view on linguistic mastery, which seemed to dominate ELT discourse in the 1970s and 1980s in which one major characteristic of ELT debate was opposing tendencies [35]. It was not until the early 1990s that communication was redefined more as a process and less as a product (1989a). Since then, views on language education have moved into more flexibility and harmony than contrast and opposition, with more flexible ideas such as eclectic instruction [36], real-world integrated skills [37], and post-method pedagogy [38]. Although the mindset about language skills has shifted from product-oriented to process-oriented thinking, listening continued to be seen as a stand-alone receptive construct, perhaps out of convenient labelling rather than pedagogical evolvement. Arguably, there is a need to rethink this categorisation. To retain the receptive and productive dichotomy is to hold on to a conservative trend that resists the ecological view on language today where boundaries in knowledge about communication have been reorganised beyond compartmentalisation. Pragmatically, both listeners' verbal and behavioral participation in communication that navigate conversation [31]. Logistically, such division only serves to keep language teaching in convenient chapters for easy reference [19], [30].

Skills such as speaking and writing are categorised as productive due to their function in making output visible [39], [40]. It is believed that spoken output lays the foundation for listening [41], whereas written output serves accessible reading [39]. In this way, productive output serves comprehensible input. In other words, for a set of skills to be acknowledged as productive, it should first of all be visible. The question that should cross our mind, then, is: can listening be visible? When

we talk, how do we know that the interlocutor is listening? We know that through their gestures such as nodding and frowning, through their eye contact which shows they are with us in the conversation, through small sounds they make to confirm and encourage or disapprove and ponder, and through their posture which denotes interest or impatience. If we agree that these signals are important as part of communication, then listening does contain visible information. Visibility as one characteristic of listening, therefore, should make this competence a set of productive micro-skills. One prominent feature of productive skills is the embedment of rich communicative situations. In many cases, for language use to be well contextualised in a meaningful context, a useful educational approach can be Project-Based Learning (PBL) [42]–[46]. This tradition allows learners to create and execute plans as well as reflect and evaluate their learning through tasks reflecting authentic communication [47]–[49]. According to Stoller [50], such learning involves several tasks, including deciding on a theme of the project, thinking about skills, gathering information, setting objectives, analysing the project, presenting the outcome, and reflecting upon it.

One example of such an activity would be learners introducing their hometowns to their classmates. To perform this task, they need to collect information on delicacies, art, history, and places of interest in their hometown to build content for the presentation. The teacher and peers then provide feedback and encourage the presenter to reflect on ways of improving content and methods of delivery. In this way, the activity has an authentic and collaborative nature [51]–[57]. In this complex process, speaking is not the only major component, but it is the involvement of listening, thinking, observation and reflection that builds the whole experience of production. In other words, both speaking and listening skills share an equally important responsibility in making output happen. Because of this, giving credit to speaking alone as productive skills while reducing listening to receptive skills not only misrepresents the equal weighing of skills but also fails to do justice to learners' interwoven efforts. In the meantime, the teacher and peers during the presentation listen not only to seek understanding but also to vigorously process data for constructing feedback. Before they can articulate their comments, such output exists in an invisible form as it is constantly built by listening, to the extent that there is no way to separate comprehension from feedback production. Listening, in this case, is far more complex than a mere process of receiving information. Instead, it is a highly proactive action that continuously feeds output into every piece of input, so that the moment the presentation ends, such invisible output is instantly delivered as feedback. If one assumes that listening is solely confined to information reception and passive comprehension, how would one explain where such construction of comments comes from? Why should output construction be considered a receptive process? In some instants, listening can serve comprehension alone; but, in many cases, it can stretch beyond comprehension and towards invisible speaking. To assume that all kinds of listening are of a receptive kind would be to devalue such productive dynamics in actual communication.

In both speaking and writing skills, the involvement of feedback plays a huge role in the reflection process. It is the combination of feedback and reflection that offers full conditions for learners to explore their merits and shortcomings as well as to exchange ideas and suggestions [58]–[61]. This is a process that elevates language competence to a profound level. Furthermore, feedback from both students and teachers can also cultivate a critical thinking facility [58], [59], [61]–[63]. For feedback to achieve specific content and high quality, the listening process has to be much more attentive and rigorous than merely taking in information. The impact of specific, well-thought-out feedback cannot be more emphasised in language learning and performance (see, for example, [64]). For feedback to be of highly learnable quality requires that students have already had a strong, command of language skills, and preferably a better command than that of the presenter, so that they can see beyond the ability of the presenter [60]. By and large, the ability to interact with and assess communication circumstances is as valuable as the ability to produce language [65], [66]. It is through such active engagement, in this case, critical listening, that would maximise students' productive learning in both accuracy and appropriateness of language use within communicative contexts [67]–[69]. When listening is well contextualised, it would stretch beyond a passive role and into more complex dynamics. Such dynamics embrace extended capacity such as integrated skills, enhanced focus on content, simulative situations, and so forth. It is through such design that listening can play a more embedded role beyond mere comprehension. Some examples of tasks that would allow learners to be more active in the integration of speaking and listening include storytelling connected to learning contents [70], problem-solving interactions [70]–[73], learner-centred discussion [67], [69], grammar in a simulative situation [74], [75], among others. All of these would create more learning motivation and connect listening closely with output preparation.

4. Recommended drama-based tasks for productive listening

To make the above components possible, we would like to suggest the use of drama which embodies some features of productive learning. The relevant discourse has attributed a range of advantages to the use of drama in communicative language practice. They include a rich context [76], a sense of coherence [76], [77], collaborative and communicative work [78], an enjoyable learning environment [79], as well as orientation to both process and outcome. Besides, acting requires learners to interact with scripts, co-construct conversations and utilise body language as well as engage with both verbal and non-verbal contents [77], [80]. More importantly, acting promotes learners' active listening skills because it encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes in communicative contexts [81]. For instance, learners would read their lines beforehand and listen to peers' lines during acting. They pay attention to how intonation can be used to communicate feelings.

Behavior such as gestures and facial expressions can signal emotion both productively and receptively. All of these are subject to multiple rehearsal experiences and feedback, making the learning process extremely rich in content and filled with intensively recycled language practice. Besides, exaggeration as an inherent element in drama also plays a role in the consolidation of verbal and non-verbal language as well as the awareness of purposeful talking and listening. It is through this enhanced practice that listening skills in the acting quality can be taken to the next level where it ranks equal with speaking in its communication. Impact. For example, a response to speech can be made both verbally and non-verbally whereby, in many cases, the listening of a character without answering can produce meanings and provoke reactions. Even a sound, a pause, or a look can be laden with intended communicative effects. Our proposed activity revolves around the story of *Alice in Wonderland*, a classic English novel that has been adapted into movies, plays, and musicals. The plot is full of twists and turns, along with collisions of strong emotions. We suggest using the BBC Learning English (2015) version which caters to EFL learners' language learning. This material contains general transcripts with corresponding recordings, both of which will be used during the task.

Stage one – Role distribution and planning

A class of about 20 students can be divided into three groups, each of which has a student leader who helps allocate multiple roles to group members. The teacher prepares three handouts. The first handout serves to assign roles for all the groups; the second sheet is the plot with the task to be played by each role including when they come in and what their intention is; and the third sheet is a feedback structure for students to later reflect on the learning process, including items such as acting skills, articulation, role fulfillment, what non-verbal behavior is significant, and what characters are important to listen to so that one's role can be performed responsively. Stage properties are to be prepared by the whole class beforehand such as rabbit-ear headbands for the White Rabbit and a magician-like hat for the Hatter. With the help of the teacher, the class vote for one person to act as Alice, the leading female. This decision is based on everyone's understanding that Alice is supposed to be a clever, well-mannered, and wildly curious character who is also praised for her courage and enthusiasm. For the play to happen smoothly, the student who slips into this role should have a fluent command of the target language. Listening plays a major role in this activity, which is as important as speaking. The teacher highlights that the most important focus in this play is personal expression, such as eye contact, facial expression, posture, and gesture, when each character listens to others. For example, When Alice enters Wonderland, she is expected to be fascinated or astonished by some animals or items that can speak human languages.

Stage two – Play rehearsal

Each team has 20 minutes to skim their lines and prepare for their performance. This is because improvisation without knowing the script in advance would be too hard [82]. The main content of the lines is to adhere to while the wording can be improvised by students. This stage of studying the lines will later assist listening practice when students combine their memory of the play content with their listening ability. It is through such a process that the role of cognitive familiarity and spontaneous communication merge (see, for example, [69], [81]). Later when it comes to acting, attentive listening is important not just for comprehension but also for timely and appropriate verbal interaction. As evident in the discourse, the goal of comprehensible input is to produce language [21], [22]. The teacher observes student rehearsal with a supervision role, giving advice on language use as well as verbal and non-verbal improvisation if needs be. Students who are not too confident in spontaneous speech can produce notes to use when necessary. It is important that the teacher encourages students'

creative improvisation and gives compliments where appropriate to motivate students in their learning [83], [84].

Stage three – Student performance and teacher note-taking

The teacher is the narrator of the story and students need to listen attentively to know when they need to enter their respective scenes. While watching, the teacher takes notes of each student's active listening, manifested through behavioral and emotional processing. There is a need to maintain acting while it is not one's turn to speak up. The most effective non-verbal expression would denote how well one is listening and later when it is one's turn to speak, the language would continue to demonstrate the continuation between listening and speaking in a coherent flow. Sometimes, coherence might break down, such as when characters do not show relevant behavior or when someone improvises too differently from the original script and others do not respond accordingly but focus only on their original script. The teacher should be able to identify such moments and follow them up, which would be a fantastic opportunity to teach students how productive listening is all about and what that means in real-world communication. All feedback should be saved until the end of the entire show and no disruption should be created by the teacher. Sometimes, the teacher can initiate a round of applause if students are doing particularly well at any instant of the play. Since the activity has a strong listening focus, notes on attentive listening, and how that builds responsive behavior should be taken in detail. For example, when Alice is falling down the hole, she is supposed to either raise both hands or cross her arms in front of her chest to simulate the dropping action.

Stage four - Feedback and mutual learning

Feedback is organised in three steps. The first step requires students to discuss what went well and what could be improved within their group. Self-assessment is an important strategy in reflective learning [85]–[88]. The second step asks every group to provide comments to other groups. In the third step, the teacher shares feedback with everyone. Overall, feedback should be both constructive and positive where relevant; and should be light-hearted or humorous rather than taking on the flavor of criticism. The reflective process should be managed in a way to bring out a positive, encouraging impact on students' attitudes towards learning [89], which include, for example, peers complementing each other's good performance [63]. Even when there emerges a sense of competition or jealousy among peers, feedback should be viewed in light of healthy mutual learning [90]. This experience, besides students' mutual learning, would also inform the teacher in subsequent teaching decisions, especially after a detailed account of students' strengths and weaknesses is documented. This might include language use, awareness of social roles, attentive listening, and appropriate responses, pronunciation challenges, teamwork and creative improvisation, among others. When a learning experience is rich, it has the power to provide tremendous amounts of information that can illuminate learning needs and pedagogical responses to such needs (see, for example, [91], [92]. Besides, the way the teacher handles such events, if positive and flexible rather than negative and mechanical, might help students develop positive attitudes towards their language learning [93], [94].

Sometime after the above activity, students might welcome a second chance to perform. This time, they should be allowed to enjoy more creative freedom in constructing their plot. When this happens, the teacher might wish to step back and invite one class member to act in the role of a director, that is, the supervisor of the entire production. To strengthen group cohesiveness, each team can come up with a name for themselves, such as the shining star, the determiner, the mystery team, and so on. The significance of this naming is to feel they belong to a wonderful group with a clear purpose. Before the performance date, the whole class should discuss a plot together in one lesson and each team should meet separately in their own time for preparation. The teacher can play the role of an advisor who provides comments when students need help, such as vocabulary choice, idea construction, the flow of the play, and so on. This consultation can happen during a lesson, after the lesson, or via email communication. The plot can be entirely original as created by students or it can be adapted from a well-known source.

5. Conclusion

To rethink the conventional conceptualisation of listening as a construct outside productivity, the article has explored a range of features that manifest a productive stance towards listening skills. Such features include attentive listening with output in mind, body language embedded in listening tasks, and contextualised language use where the boundary between speaking and listening is no longer

clear-cut. We have argued that when such features are applied to classroom activities, they provide conditions that make listening both simultaneously receptive and productive. We have handpicked and recommended procedural use of drama to break listening down into strategic components that would reveal layers of listening and bring communicative impact to the surface of classroom learning.

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