

## Teaching Listening to EFL Students

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### ABSTRACT

*The first receptive skill a learner learns is listening. This skill, though very basic, is often thought to be a difficult skill to teach. Teachers today are more interested in teaching listening interactively. Though the term interactive is very catchy, it is quite difficult when it comes to implementation. This paper attempts to suggest classroom arrangements and some activities an EFL teacher might want to employ in the classroom. A teacher has to adopt bottom up approach like teaching the vocabulary, pronunciation, syllables, and the related grammar. It is only due to the limitation of the bottom up approach that instructors have to augment teaching with meta-cognitive skills using the top down approach. To condense, learner today have a greater control on their learning. Raza (2015) suggests to involve student and teachers equitably in the process of teaching and learning and infuse life and vigor into it.*

**Keywords:** Listening, teaching listening, listening in EFL classroom, teaching listening interactively.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Listening happens to be a difficult skill to teach foreign language learners as it is mostly non-participative (students listen to others' speech or presentation) and they have no control over the speed of speech (Blyth 2010). The consequence of this difficulty results in a very high level of anxiety and stress. This anxiety and stress raises the affective filter (Krashen 1988) in students thus clogging the path of flow of information and skill development.

Listeners at a beginning stage find it hard to comprehend the meaning of a complete spoken sentence. This is because they find themselves entangled between unearthing/guessing the meaning of novel/difficult words and full comprehension of the complete sentence/message (Goh 2000; Tanveer 2008). Goh (2000, cited in Chen 2005: 3) contends that ESL learners exhibit the following tendencies: thinking about the meaning of a part they neglect the part that follows; forget quickly and easily anything heard; understand the words but not the intended meaning.

The root cause of the problem lies in poor cognitive abilities of the students. They are unable to realize that they already possess some knowledge and they can easily build on using the same knowledge. Van de Pol et al. (2010) calls it scaffolding approach to bridge a cognitive gap in learning. This also helps develop their meta-cognitive skills (Wenden 1998: 51) regarding personal knowledge whereby they are able to realize their personal weaknesses and strengths. Students also need to know the demand of the task at hand – how to lever and carry out a particular task. This kind of knowledge, Wenden identifies as task knowledge. Learners need to recognize and appreciate learning strategies and their practice, Wenden asserts it as strategic knowledge. Byrnes (1996), Costa (2001), Sternberg (1998), Wenden (1998) and Li (2013) all agree that this kind of meta-cognition goes a long way in promoting second language acquisition.

Duzer (1997) argues that an active learner does many things unconsciously. The learner: contrives a reason for listening; listens the “raw speech and deposits and image of it in short-term memory”; assigns it a type of conversation, i.e., dialogue, monologue, lecture, etc.; determines the function of the message, i.e., persuasion, information, request, order, etc.; predicts information passed through the message; “recalls background information” and interpret the message with its help; checks and confirms the comprehension of the message; tries to make sure that the new information is safely hoarded in the existing stock of related information; flushes clear the short-term memory for later use (Brown 1994, Dunkel 1986).

Meta-cognition can lend a hand in developing listening skills at all stages of pre, while, and post listening. Learners can contemplate on making predictions, selecting and thinking on strategies, even before embarking on the actual listening task. Learners can “keep changing learning strategies by monitoring their learning process.” They can “evaluate effectiveness of listening strategies and skills in listening comprehension” (Li 2013).

Seating students can be one of the ways to prevail over the issue of stress and anxiety. This allows students feel more comfortable, and relaxed, and to a certain extent, out of sight from the teacher. Students, especially in the Middle East, have a tendency to sit away from the teacher, therefore it is imperative that students sit close to the teacher and they are not scattered. The teacher can shuffle good students among less performing students. The teacher may also want to place good students on the last benches.

Since most of the EFL classes have limited space in the room, therefore, the teacher has to let students sit in pairs and with ample space in between the columns and rows of students for the teacher to move through and approach each student individually (Figure 1).

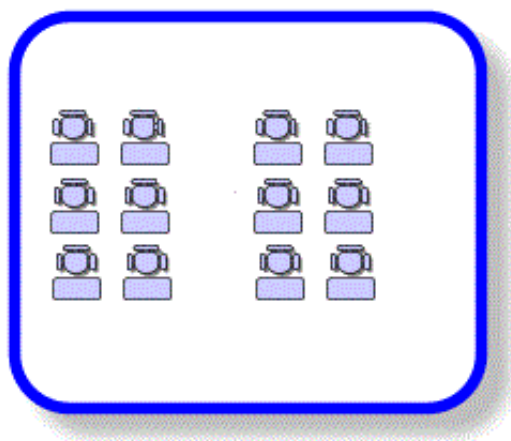


Figure 1. *Sitting arrangement: in pairs*

In other words, it caters for class rooms where the number of students exceed 15-20 (a typical scenario in most of the EFL classes): pair-work can be a frequent activity without altering anything; students can easily see the board (Abela 2006); students remain in front of the teacher and vice versa. The disadvantages are also numerous; group work cannot be performed smoothly without altering the seating plan; teacher cannot see the progress of the backbenchers without physically going near them, etc. However, there are many more seating plans used in the classrooms around the globe.

The most effective in the eyes of the author is the semi-circle or “the horseshoe” (Figure 2). This arrangement is the favorite of most of the English language instructors. Learners sit face-to-face – everyone right in the front of the teacher, i.e., there are no back benchers at all. It is ideal for pair work and small groups, i.e., group of three students. The teacher can immediately approach every student directly and monitor the progress without any stumbling block. The only disadvantage of this seating plan is it requires large or very large room and accommodates very few students.

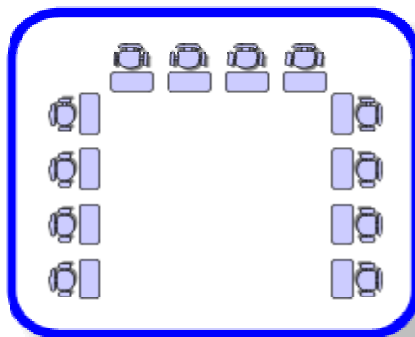


Figure 2. *Sitting arrangement: The horseshoe*

“Horseshoe compact” (Abela 2006) is an update of the “horseshoe” seating plan to accommodate a few more students (Figure 3). The boon of this style is that students in the middle can work in larger groups as compared to the ones sitting by the walls.

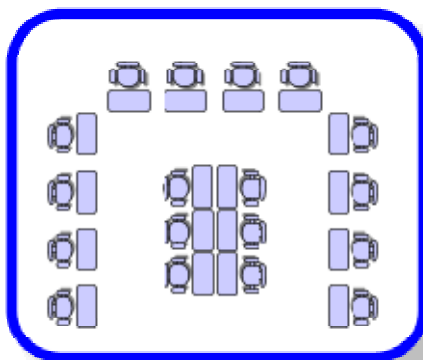


Figure 3. *Sitting arrangement: The horseshoe compact*

But, there are many shortcomings of this style: it is difficult for the instructor to manage the class; students sitting against the wall in the front of the teacher not only become backbenchers, they remain hidden behind the group of students sitting in the middle; maneuverability and visibility of the instructor is compromised (Abela 2006).

Cluster of tables or “group of tables,” as Abela calls it, is another good form of seating arrangement suitable for EFL classes (Figure 4).

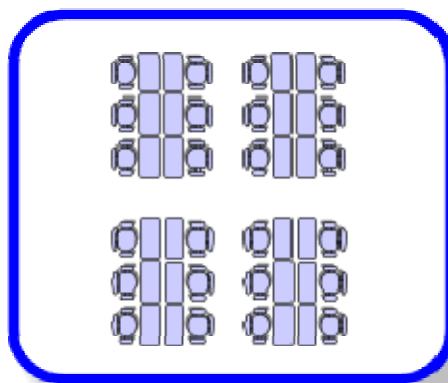


Figure 4. *Sitting arrangement: Group of tables*

This style is compact and allows more space for the teacher to maneuver and approach students. Students can do group activities. They can easily see the teacher and the whiteboard. The downsides are that: it is not suitable for individual work; groups might find it difficult to communicate with other groups; teacher cannot see all the students at the same time, therefore some student/s might remain neglected.

Circular seating plan is another form suggested by Abela (Figure 5). This type of arrangement is usually seen in Montessori level classes. It is ideal for discussions and activities that involve social interaction. It is ideal for the people who have more of interpersonal intelligence (Gardner).

But, it allows very limited scope for a variety of activities in the classroom; it needs big, spacious rooms; it caters very limited number of students; some students sit having their back towards the board; some students sit having their back towards the instructor – thus obscuring visibility.

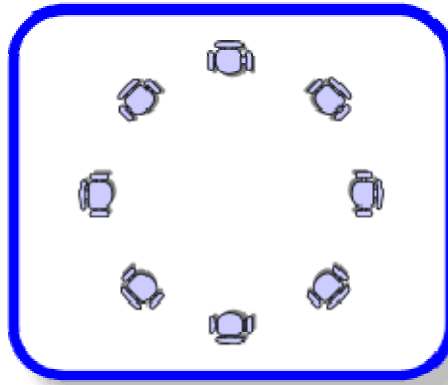


Figure 5. *Sitting arrangement: Circular plan*

Another layout – most frequently witnessed in the classes in underdeveloped countries where there is usually a large number of pupil in each class – is the “examination layout”, as shown below in Figure 6.

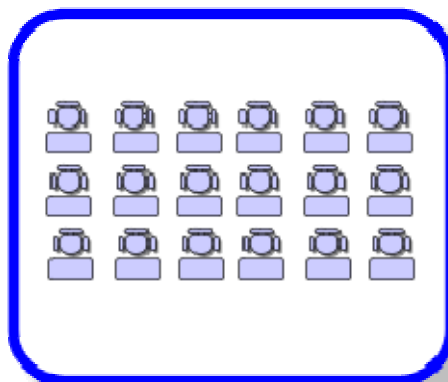


Figure 6. *Sitting arrangement: Examination layout*

Adela finds only one advantage of this layout, i.e., a very large number of students can be accommodated. Nonetheless, there are many more disadvantages of this layout: backbenchers always remain out of easy approach; teacher cannot monitor all the students equally and individually; shy and less motivated students try to sit on the last seats to hide themselves from the teacher.

Talking of teaching techniques, there are many, but one is worth mentioning. A mixture of “Top Down” and “Bottom Up” approaches of teaching is a suitable tool for the Arab listeners to develop better comprehension of the listening material. Some activities (Top Down activities) involve activating the schemata (Raza 2011). Schemata is the “prior knowledge of the context in which listening takes place to make sense of what is being heard” Önal (2015). Such activities help learners in terms of better motivation and self-confidence. On the other hand, Bottom Up activities start with lexicon and its pronunciation. Students are better able to understand words, syllables, and the related grammar. Cloze listening, dictation, and multiple choice questions after a text are some of the activities teachers usually perform in the classroom (Richards 2008: 4).

## 2. PRE-LISTENING

The very reason for pre-listening exercise is that whenever we watch or listen to some debate or news, we already have some idea of the same. This previous knowledge germinates our quest to listen for some updates. The same way we have to sprout a desire in our students to get updates on their previous knowledge. Following activities can be exploited as pre-listening activities:

1. Write the topic of the lesson on the board. Seeing the topic on the board makes the students unknowingly activate their schematic knowledge (Raza 2011).
2. Display some related pictures on the board. When students look at the pictures, they unconsciously start relating their schematic knowledge to the pictures. If they cannot, it fosters curiosity, consequently, they become ready-learners. If they can assimilate the pictures with their prior schemata only partially, they become active learners once again to fill-in the remaining gap. Worst-case scenario, if they fail to integrate any of the images or they do not have any prior knowledge of the topic, they will come to realize – it is a novel (for them only) vista of life, that the lesson is going to open before them. Hence, they become interested in learning.
3. Asking some questions related to the topic to activate their schematic knowledge (Raza 2011). The advantages of this activity are many: less motivated students also become involved; helps the whole class concentrate on the same point; students are ready to participate involuntarily, etc. This activity will help inform them about the type of information for which they have to listen for (Craven 2011).
4. Pre-teach any new vocabulary that the teacher deems important for understanding (Craven 2011). To accomplish this task the teacher may:
  - a. want to write a list of new/difficult vocabulary items on the board. It is a bottom-up technique.
  - b. help the students slice the words into syllables and then pronounce them separately and later in the form of complete utterance. Enabling realize the linguistic



- features of the input. It also helps building linguistic repertoire, thus, supplementing self-confidence and communicative competence.
- c. at best, articulate the words in RP (Received Pronunciation) and let the class repeat after. This activity will not only engender fun and interest, but also help involve the less responsive and shy students.
  - d. want to pre-teach and improve critical thinking skills: the teacher may use the vocabulary items in sentences and let students guess the meaning from the context (Thrush, Baldwin & Blass 2012).
5. Play a little bit (first 15-25 % of the transcript) of the recording and ask the students to predict about what is coming forth (Nemtchinova 2013: 15). This predicting activity coupled with active schemata will help them grasp the message of the recording. This gives them a purpose for listening (NCLRC 2003). Nemtchinova contends that students can “make predictions about the topic and the setting of the conversation” at this stage.
  6. Inform students that it is not mandatory for them to understand each and every word they hear (Craven 2011).

### 3. WHILE-LISTENING

Every class is different, so the same activity may not turn out to be useful in every class without modification and update. It depends on the good judgment of the teacher to select, modify, sequence and employ the activities. Therefore, the author suggests a variety of while-listening activities:

1. Play the recording and ask the students to tell the main idea, i.e., listening for the gist.
2. Now replay the recording and ask some general questions about the recording. For example, asking about the relationship between speakers, mood of speakers, the place where the speakers are, etc.
3. Now ask some direct and simple questions to answer. For example, listening for some number, time, date or some

obvious piece/s of information. This activity will be listening for specific information. This activity helps motivate students by raising their confidence and self-esteem.

4. Write select groups of words and phrases (phrases may be rephrased compared to the ones spoken in the listening) on the board in a jumbled form. Then play the recording and ask students to identify the groups of words and phrases they hear. This helps students listen for details.
5. Verify the answers by listening once again (NCLRC 2003).
6. Checking for meaning and/or clarification – teacher can ask students to tell the meaning of some chosen sentences from the listening. For example, “He said he was feeling blue. Does that mean he was feeling sad?” (Pesce).
7. Students can be prompted to rephrasing the dialogues in the listening (Pesce).
8. If students complain about the speed of recording. The teacher can take all or select from the following measures.
  - a. The teacher may provide the students with a transcript of the listening material and let them read it. Play the recording once again and take their feedback if they can match the speed.
  - b. If they still fail to go with the pace, it means that they are at a lower level than anticipated. Now, display the transcript on the projector and play the recording. The teacher follows the recorded speech on the transcript with the help of a pointer. If the teacher does not have a projector at hand, he may ask them to open the transcript and read it as they listen to the recording being played.
  - c. The teacher may want to try speaking the same speech but with a slower speed and ask the students to repeat every single sentence, after the teacher finishes it.
  - d. If the teacher wants to solve the speed issue in the original recording. He can install Winamp software and its plug-in called, PaceMaker (Winamp can be downloaded from <http://winamp.en.softonic.com/>), and PaceMaker from: <http://www.surina.net/pacemaker/download.html>. Using these two applications the teacher can easily manipulate the speed of recording

- without compromising the pitch and tempo of the recording.
- e. The teacher can provide the students with the sound track of the listening and ask them to copy it in their smart phones. In their leisure, or on the go, they should play the audio and try mimicking the same. They should try this at least two to three times a day; for best results, they can use earphones.
9. The teacher repeats the recording and completes the exercise given in the book. While performing this exercise, ask students to say “stop” aloud when they hear the answer of the question. It is imperative that the teacher devotes some time for reading the questions and understanding them before attempting to find answers.
  10. It is a good idea (if possible) that the teacher also repeats the same listening text aloud in front of the students. The facial expressions and bodily gestures not only arouse interest but also make available invaluable cues to meaning that are otherwise missed (Nemtchinova 2013: 17).
  11. Nemtchinova suggests “to approximate real-life listening experiences, students can be grouped or paired up to practice showing understanding or incomprehension, asking questions, agreeing or disagreeing with the speaker, and interrupting when appropriate.” This is especially prescribed for low intermediate level students.
  12. Duzer (1997) thinks non-verbal cues like “using video can help learners develop cognitive strategies.” The teacher can play the video and turn the volume off. Then prompt the learners to predict about what is happening by answering the questions given by the teacher.
  13. Students hypothesize about the situation in a video as they watch it with sound turned off. Playing the video once again with the sound turned on helps the learners not only check their own responses to the questions given by the instructor, it also confirms or modifies the hypothesis formed by students while watching the video without sound and attempting to answer the questions given by the teacher (Rubin 1995).

14. Note-taking and making outline can be another effective activity suggested by Lund (1990).
15. Instructor can prompt the learner to fill-in a chart or draw a route on a printed map on the basis of information retrieved from the listening (Duzer 1997).
16. Thrush, Baldwin, and Blass (2012) contend that students may be sensitized to differentiating between reduced and long forms of words and expressions in the spoken language. The teacher may write sentences with long forms vis-à-vis reduced forms of specific and commonly used words and expressions. If available, an audio can be played or the teacher can speak himself. Student can be prompted to identify the sentence they hear.

#### 4. POST-LISTENING

Post listening is the activity that helps integrate the recently learnt ideas, concepts and knowledge into their existing schemata, hence enhancing their repertoire of knowledge and skills.

1. The instructor prepares his/her own questions and asks students to answer them while she/he plays the recording once again.
2. Prompt students to enumerate the vocabulary they are interested in and they think they might use at a later stage in their life.
3. Instructor can ask students to open the tape script (if available) at the end of the book (if prescribed) and read it (Craven2011). If the instructor uses custom designed and/or developed listening material, then it becomes the responsibility of the instructor to provide the written script of the same.
4. Learners (at the very beginning stage) may be asked to write a short introduction to the topic in their native language (COERL 2010).
5. Instructors can use authentic material regarding day-to-day (real life) situations in the audio and video recordings. After

completing the listening activity, the instructor may ask the learner to express their own views about the same situation/topic.

6. Students may be assigned simple tasks, like discussion and opinion forming and expressions.
7. Zhang (2001) recommends that learners be encouraged to stratify the strategies as per their effectiveness.
8. Zhang further suggests that listeners evaluate themselves and use their preferred comprehension strategies.
9. To give learners further autonomy, they can be asked to compose comprehension questions as many as they can. This activity in the beginning might prove difficult for them, so this activity might be initiated at an advanced stage.
10. The instructor might want to revise the whole lesson.
11. A revision of the new vocabulary items involved in the lesson can serve nicely to help students reinforce the related vocabulary.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Listening is no more a passive activity. Today, it involves communication and interlocation. This makes teaching effective, fun and interesting and the learner receives greater control of the learning process. Effective seating layout is the first prerequisite of better communication. An appropriate blend of available approaches and activities provides students self-confidence and motivation.

An interactive listening class begins with a warm-up or pre-listening activity. Pre-listening involves activating and building upon the existing schemata, and introducing new vocabulary. Pre-listening is followed by a battery of while-listening activities at individual, pair and group levels. Post-listening activities are used as backup and reinforcement.

The instructor receives first hand information and knowledge about the effectiveness of the activities from the students. It is important because the activities are aimed at imparting skill and knowledge to them. Their feedback helps in indentifying the activities students find fun, interesting, and giving greater control

on their own learning styles. Introduction, explication, variety, practice, feedback, and students' "pick-activities" are the keys to a positive, effective and lasting impact on learners.

#### NOTE

1. The pictures used in the paper are taken and adapted from James Abela's website: <<http://www.jamesabela.co.uk/beginner/seats.html>>.

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