

The development of listening-comprehension skills in the training of interpreters of foreign languages

El desarrollo de las habilidades de audiocomprensión en la formación de intérpretes en lenguas extranjeras

*MSc. Jorge Luis Herrera-Ochoa, jherrera@uo.edu.cu,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5659-4544>;*

Dr. C. María Elena Álvarez-López, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6474-5111>;

Dr. C. Elaine Frómeta-Quintana, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8003-2859>

Facultad de Lenguas Extranjeras, Universidad de Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba

Abstract

The objective of the present article is to present, by means of a literature overview, some theoretical and practical considerations related to the listening comprehension skill. Consequently, some key theoretical approaches of the training of interpreters-to-be are analyzed. The result of the study reveals theoretical gaps as to the treatment of listening comprehension, which hinder its coherent articulation with interpretation in the didactic process of the interpreter-to-be.

Key words: listening comprehension skill, training of interpreters, Didactics of Listening Comprehension, Didactics of Interpretation.

Resumen

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo presentar, a partir de un análisis de referentes teóricos, consideraciones teórico-prácticas sobre la habilidad de audiocomprensión, al argumentar algunos de sus enfoques teóricos esenciales desde la formación del futuro intérprete de lenguas extranjeras. El resultado de este estudio reveló que existen vacíos teóricos en relación con el tratamiento de la audiocomprensión que no garantizan una coherente articulación con la interpretación en el proceso didáctico del futuro intérprete.

Palabras clave: habilidad de audiocomprensión, formación de intérpretes, didáctica de la audiocomprensión, didáctica de la interpretación.

Introduction

In Cuba, special attention has been devoted to the learning of foreign languages. The fact of living in a monolingual island fosters the need to learn other languages as a way to strengthen ties with other peoples of the world, besides being a way to keep up to date with the latest advances in science and technology.

The teaching of such languages as English, French, Russian, German and Italian, among others, has been present to a greater or lesser extent in the different levels of the National Education System. For decades, the faculties and departments of Foreign Languages of Cuban universities have been at the forefront in the training of foreign language specialists with different modes of action. This training has gone through different stages ranging from the training of graduates with a narrow profile, in Linguistics and Translation - Interpretation in previous curricula, to the training of a professional with a broad profile as a translator, interpreter and teacher in latest curricula.

In the latest curricula there is a tendency to enhance a better preparation of the graduate in two professional profiles: one in the area of Linguistics, with a view to training competent graduates capable of solving problems related to the process of teaching foreign languages at the higher level, collaborating in research related to Linguistics as a science and in the area of historical literary studies, discourse analysis, editing of texts and publications related to this language; the second profile trains competent graduates capable of translating from English and the second foreign language into Spanish and vice versa, texts of various types and functional styles, as well as performing consecutive and bilateral interpretations on various subjects. (MES, Plan de Estudio E. Carrera Lengua Inglesa con Segunda Lengua Extranjera, 2017).

Since 1998, it was conceived to train professionals specialized in a first foreign language as translators, interpreters and teachers, with high competitive levels in this language, in addition to the ability to perform professionally in a second foreign language. To achieve these objectives, the curricular design of these courses was conceived in such a way that students would develop, in a harmonious and comprehensive manner, the four basic skills of verbal activity intensively in an initial stage named the *introductory course*, which allowed them to use the first language as a means of instruction from the first year of the course, and

adequately prepared them to develop during their university studies the necessary professional skills for the use of the first and second foreign language as instruments of specialized work.

To achieve the model of the professional in these majors, two objectives to be achieved are particularly highlighted:

- Comprehend authentic oral texts of diverse functional styles and subject matters in the first foreign language.
- Process information from authentic oral texts within the cognitive framework of an advanced level in the second foreign language.

The objectives described above are dynamized in a skill that requires a high degree of generalization. This skill is approached by scientific literature with different denominations, the term listening comprehension being the most commonly used. Córdoba (2005) states that it is practically impossible to have a single definition of listening comprehension and quotes Dunkel (1991) who found in the article "A Content Analysis of Fifty Definitions of Listening" 34 different definitions presented in various texts, concluding that, in fact, there is no universally accepted definition.

Among the authors who assume the denomination of listening comprehension, Domínguez (2011) defines it as "the receptive form of verbal activity which guarantees the apprehension of the message that arrives through the auditory analyzer. It manifests itself in levels of fragmented (superficial), global (general), detailed (complete) and critical comprehension, a qualitatively higher level in the degree of depth.

Brooks and Heath (1991) define it more simply: "listening comprehension is a combination of what we hear, what we understand and what we remember". The International Listening Association (ILA) defines listening comprehension in the following terms: "listening comprehension is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from what is received, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages" (ILA, 1996: online).

The experience and pedagogical practice of the teachers who teach consecutive interpretation subjects in the English Language major at Universidad de Oriente, along with the application of surveys and classroom observation, show insufficiencies in the development of listening

comprehension in students who face interpreting for the first time. For this reason, it was decided, through the analysis of theoretical references, to investigate the causes of this problem, and the result of this study revealed that there are theoretical gaps in relation to the treatment of listening comprehension that do not guarantee a coherent articulation with interpretation in the didactic process of the trainee interpreter. Likewise, insufficient approaches to the didactics of listening comprehension in foreign languages are observed in this sense, which do not sufficiently deepen in the theoretical-methodological systematization of the dynamics of this process in relation to the object of the profession.

The present article aims to present some theoretical-practical considerations on the skill of listening comprehension by arguing some of its essential determinations in the formation of the trainee interpreter.

Materials and methods

For the present analysis, a panoramic review of the scientific literature on the development of the listening comprehension skill and its relation to the foreign language interpreting process was carried out. Likewise, normative documents on the teaching-educational process for listening comprehension skills and foreign language interpreting were analyzed.

Results

The literature review conducted reveals that it is necessary for the teaching-learning process of the English Language major to take into account that the development of skills related to the comprehension of speech in a foreign language is complex in nature, closely related to other types of speech activity, and meets the general learning objectives at each stage.

In order to develop a more productive approach to teaching the referred skill, it is suggested to take into account the following principles:

- 1) The use of authentic recordings from the initial stage, adapting the tasks to the complexity of the material presented (i.e., the more complex the text heard, the simpler the educational task, the greater the role of visual support);

- 2) Active inclusion in the work at an advanced stage of training, in addition to recordings of native speakers, audio recordings of non-native speakers, as well as speech samples of representatives of different social groups and dialects. This principle is due to the fact that future interpreting specialists have to be able to understand the foreign language spoken by native and non-native speakers, as well as different registers of the language.
- 3) Benefiting from the advantages of pair and group work, creating favorable conditions from the psychological point of view (motivation, activation, identification with group decisions, feedback on performance, etc.).
- 4) The inclusion of listening tasks in a greater number of in-class and extracurricular activities, in order to increase motivation to learn.
- 5) Maximum use of mini-tasks for listening comprehension when teaching other aspects (e.g., the first presentation of new material, a transformation exercise to practice grammar, dictations, etc.).
- 6) The development of psychological mechanisms essential for the successful perception and comprehension of foreign language audio speech (e.g., probabilistic forecasting).
- 7) The development of metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies necessary for learning, such as selective attention, planning, control, evaluation, repetition, visualization of images, transfer, cooperation, self-stimulation, etc.

The described principles relate to all aspects of the communicative situation, affecting the state, the skills of the participants of communication, the parameters of the message. In addition, listening as a type of speech activity turns out to be directionally included in multidirectional activities of a different order. This requires special training and special education of teachers.

Donskaya and Iegorova (2016) proposed a group of tasks that were taken into account in order to achieve greater effectiveness of listening comprehension, Some of them are applied in the process of teaching-learning of future interpreters:

Preliminary stage

In the preliminary or initial stage of training, the tasks are of a closed nature and are associated with a general understanding of what has been heard. The main objectives of this stage are to eliminate those language difficulties that prevent the implementation of more tasks and the development of probabilistic prognostic skills, so exercises are used to encourage students to predict the content of the text through the well-known "brainstorming" task, to infer the meaning of unknown words to achieve a better understanding of the text.

At this stage, an individualization of teaching could also be considered, which consists of dividing the group into subgroups, each of which is given specific tasks. When preparing the material to work in these groups, those elements of the text that may present certain difficulties for the listeners are identified and systematized, as well as those fragments that are of immediate interest and are key to comprehension.

In the initial stage, tasks are set to teach the listener to distinguish sounds and words, phrases, names, numbers, geographical names, to isolate and construct interesting facts and events in a given sequence. The main genres here are message and conversation, and the form of presentation is narration.

Main stage

In the main stage, listeners are given tasks, depending on the type of listening, for gist, detailed or critical comprehension. It can be completing charts, diagrams, graphs, answering to questions, assessment of statements, filling in blanks, presentation with elements of summary of what was heard.

At this stage, the genres of conversation, interviews, speeches are introduced in teaching; modes of presentation: narration, reasoning and description. The duration of the sound of the text increases (up to 3-4 minutes). As a result, general and detailed levels of comprehension are formed. Listeners establish logical connections between the elements of the text, defining the semantic center of the sentence, separating the main from the secondary, classifying facts according to a given criterion, highlighting known and new information, and also revealing the compositional structure of the audio text.

Advanced stage

This stage is consolidation and helps to include listening to the text in activities related to the development of other speech skills: using lexical and grammatical material to construct their

own evaluative statements, performing tasks on different types of translation using this material.

The advanced stage of the training aims to develop a critical level of comprehension and skills in translation and written recording of what is heard. Listeners should be able to evaluate and correctly use the features of the speech situation for the purpose of the subsequent correct translation of the sentences in a paragraph, be aware of the value of the information offered to solve the task.

Experience in the use of programs developed on the basis of these recommendations, showed that they allow students to form optimal listening strategies, characterized by a conscious focus of attention, perception of holistic syntagms, sentences and not smaller units, effective work of probabilistic forecasting mechanisms and comparison of the received information with the existing one, the ability not to pay attention to unfamiliar vocabulary and grammatical phenomena, restoration of information lost due to redundancy of speech; activation of mnemonic processes, automation of processing abilities of large speech units (their structuring, gradation of elements according to the degree of information content, novelty, etc. , adaptation to a type of incomplete pronunciation).

At advanced stages of training, elements of consecutive interpretation are introduced, as well as analysis of used linguistic means, precision components, key words; detailed comprehension controlled by multiple-choice exercises, identifying truthful statements, answering questions about the listening material.

Subsequently, the elements of note-taking and summarizing of the audio text are introduced both in the source language and in the target language, and according to the principle of increasing difficulty (complexity, length, topic, conditions for the presentation of the text change).

Skills that compensate for loss of information and lack of linguistic experience or subject matter knowledge are particularly important. Listeners should be able to divide the audiotext into semantic segments, write precision words (proper names, geographical names, numbers, abbreviations); highlight the key words in each segment to write. The duration of the audiotext is up to 5-6 minutes, discussion and lecture genres are introduced.

The former reveals that the different stages of the process involve the listening comprehension in different degrees of complexity, from the psychological aspects to the elements that connote a strategic learning of the student and those that account for the application of textual linguistics so that the student achieves full interaction with the oral text and can understand it, decode it and re-express it respecting the codes of both languages.

The pedagogical practice of the teachers who teach listening comprehension in the English Language major has been carried out on a scientific basis that makes the student be in better conditions for listening and capturing the general and essential ideas of the auditory material, it is done from a three-phase methodology that seeks the student's interactivity with the text from the development of their anticipation mechanisms, moves from the understanding of the material, to the extrapolation of its content to other situations and contexts. However, the generality of this methodological approach, valid for other purposes, raises a revision of the listening comprehension process, which must have another singularity given the object of the profession of the kind of students being trained.

Discussion

Interpreters listen to what is said and then translate this information into another language to convey the correct meaning. Consequently, the accuracy and fidelity of the meaning-sense relationship in interpreting would be affected if the listening is not done correctly (Garcia, 1996). This is why a good interpreter must know how to listen. Interpretive accuracy and fidelity are, therefore, an important part of the interpreter's performance. Because of this, mastery of the two languages involved will not yield accurate results if the interpreter is not a good listener.

In practice, interpreters must be able to demonstrate strong verbal reaction skills to a communicative situation. This is only possible if listening comprehension is optimally developed as part of the oral communication. In addition, they must process information from spoken texts within the cognitive framework of an advanced level and demonstrate conscious control of linguistic content and oral discourse strategies (Hale, 2007). Similarly, they must apply knowledge of languages and language theory to verbal interpretation and production, based on the rules of structuring and functioning of linguistic units (Abreus, 2015).

In addressing the problems of professional formation of trainees interpreters, speech operations have not been sufficiently studied and identified. Serova (2012) considers that this lack could be due to the specific nature of the interpreter's perception, comprehension and interpretation of authentic speech information in the conditions of consecutive interpreting and that they represent the content of speech skills specific to interpreter listening. The skills, in their turn, are a necessary content of speech skills in listening to translations. The formation of these skills provides a professional orientation for the training of interpreters at the initial stage of training and becomes the basis for the further development of the receptive component of an interpreter's professional competence.

The development of listening comprehension is an essential condition at the various stages of interpreter training in foreign language majors. Since the ultimate goal of training is the development of communicative and interpreting skills, it is obvious that the role of listening comprehension is not limited to the development of the skills of semantic perception and comprehension of a coherent utterance in a foreign language.

When analyzing the essence of perception (not only auditory, but also visual), two fundamental concepts can be distinguished: perception and recognition. Perception is the process by which the receiver captures and decomposes the signals that contain the information he is looking for. Recognition is the process of identifying the emitted message with the known reference pattern. This process can be instantaneous or mediated to the extent that the reader's or listener's capacity to identify is greater or lesser, depending on his previous experience.

Within the listening comprehension process, recognition occupies a fundamental place and among the mechanisms involved and the factors that influence it, we have the informative signals, the anticipation mechanism and memory. The fundamental informative signal is considered to be intonation. Thanks to it, the receiver can segment spoken speech into syntactic blocks, understand the relationship between the different parts of the sentence and, consequently, discover the content of the utterance. Intonation makes it possible to distinguish the fundamental communicative types of the sentence: declarative, interrogative, exclamatory and imperative. (Antich, 1987)

No less important is the phonemic ear, which makes it possible to identify the different sounds of the spoken chain with their corresponding phonemes. The phonemic ear is formed at the same time as the motor speech analyzer is developed; therefore, in the initial stage of learning a foreign language, it is essential to work on listening comprehension and oral expression at the same time.

The mechanism of anticipation consists in forecasting (in the case of receptive skills - listening, reading) or organizing in advance the internal (psychic) aspect that is then externalized in the external verbal activity (physical) oral expression, writing. This mechanism gives dynamism to communication and allows concentration on the essential aspects of the discourse, since redundant, superfluous or those with less communicative value are avoided.

The planned development of this psychic mechanism allows for a faster comprehension of the utterance; it manifests itself both in listening and reading comprehension and covers all levels of language.

On the phonetic level, it is the first sounds of words that convey the most information and, in general, taking into account the context, allow us to guess the rest of the word (for example, if we hear the word spontaneously... the last two phonemes are no longer essential).

In the lexical aspect, comprehension depends, in the first place, on the greater or lesser development of the phonemic hearing, but what is fundamental to achieve a good prognosis lies in the knowledge of the combination possibilities of the known words in general and, in particular, of the combination possibilities that, in the heard text, a certain word has. Often, when we listen to our interlocutor we presuppose some of the words that he will use in his presentation and sometimes we are able to provide him with the word that, due to a momentary forgetfulness, does not come to his mind. On the grammatical level, we can also anticipate the syntactic development of a given sentence: a certain type of subject presupposes a certain type of verb, and this in turn presupposes certain complements.

The more developed in different ways the syntactic system of a given language is, the easier it is to predict the structure of its sentences. The anticipation mechanism also functions at the level of the text, which may well be the result of the concatenation of different sentences in a given context.

Memory plays a major role in the process of listening comprehension. On the one hand, immediate memory facilitates the preservation of information at each stage of the perception process until the time this information becomes part of the mediate memory. The latter retains the known reference patterns. The process of identifying what is heard with these patterns is carried out thanks to the working memory, which is also capable of integrating the series of signals heard into a single whole. Domínguez (2011) defines a set of skills proper to oral comprehension, these are:

- ✓ Recognition of sound segments and their division into their component units: sounds and words, article and noun, verb and pronouns, combination of pronouns, etc.
- ✓ Selection of relevant words in a discourse (nouns, verbs, key phrases, etc.) from the non relevant ones (pet words, repetitions, redundancies, among others) and know how to group the various elements into higher and meaningful units: sounds into words, words into syntagms, syntagms into sentences, sentences into paragraphs.
- ✓ Interpretation, which involves understanding the content of the discourse, communicative intention and purpose, overall meaning and main ideas; discriminating relevant from irrelevant information, understanding assumptions, , ambiguities, ellipses; understanding the form of the discourse, its structure and discourse organization; identifying transitional elements that mark the structure of the text, that change the topic, that open a new topic and conclude it; identifying the variant and register of the discourse; grasping the tone of the discourse: aggressiveness, irony, humor, and so on.
- ✓ Inference, which implies anticipating data from the sender: age, sex, character, purposes, information from the communicative context: situation, role of the sender and receiver, type of communication, etcetera, know how to interpret non-verbal codes.
- ✓ Retention of words, phrases and ideas for a few seconds in order to be able to interpret them later; retention of long-term memory aspects of a discourse: topic and basic data, special words (rare, new, relevant).

Mastering interpretation as a specific and complex speech activity within the framework of intercultural bilingual communication presupposes mastering knowledge, habits and skills of various types of speech activity in foreign languages together with special translation habits and skills. This ensures successful mutual understanding and interaction with the aim of exchanging information, and the results of joint professional activities.

The effectiveness of an interpreter's activity in the context of intercultural bilingual communication depends, first of all, on how he or she hears, listens, processes and understands the information of the interlocutors in communication, expressed through the source language (both foreign and native), preserves the identity of the speaker's thinking in the internal process and semantic programming of the translation of the text in L2.

So far, in addressing the problems of professional training of future interpreters, speech operations, particularly listening comprehension, have not been studied and identified in sufficient depth, due to the specific nature of perception, comprehension and interpretation by the interpreter of the original speech information in the conditions of consecutive interpreting and representing the content of speech skills specific to the listening of translators. The formation of these skills provides a professional orientation for the training of interpreters at the initial stage of apprenticeship and becomes the basis for the further development of the receptive component of an interpreter's professional competence.

At the end of the course, students should be able to actively use listening comprehension skills, have a developed working memory that allows them to process relatively large text fragments, be able to insert the content of what is heard in other types of professional activities (writing, translation, public speaking), therefore, a specialist in the field of interpreting should have the necessary skills that allow him or her to correctly evaluate and understand the message and transmit it in the target language without distortions.

Conclusions

- 1. *The teaching-learning process of listening comprehension is essential in the training of the future interpreter, so that the theoretical references previously approached constitute the basis for the development of this process in accordance with the object of the profession.***
- 2. *The process of listening comprehension has a singularity in the training of interpreters that makes it an intensive process, as opposed to listening comprehension for other purposes in the teaching of foreign languages.***
- 3. *The theoretical elements described above contribute to unveil a new perspective that gives the listening comprehension process the necessary relevance that will lead trainees interpretersto the adequate re-expression of the meaning of the original text.***

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