

Role of Short Stories in Developing English Listening Skill

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Abstract

The principal aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of short stories in teaching English listening skills. For this, the investigator adopted qualitative approach to analyse the classroom observations and experiences at the elementary and secondary level in district Kargil (Ladakh). It is found that storytelling or using short stories in language classes are useful for teaching language skills, particularly listening skills, as this technique reduces all the barriers for teaching and learning of the same.

Keywords: Storytelling, Teaching English, Listening Skill & Classroom Experiences

Introduction

Second language learning is a psychological process just like the acquisition of the first language or mother tongue. There are two prominent psychological thoughts: the first one is behaviourism, which focusses on 'habit formation' for acquisition of L2 and the second one is 'cognitive psychology' with the concept of 'mental ability' to learn a new language. But there is a need for some techniques and strategies to strengthen these concepts for better learning of a language. Consequently, by considering the ideas of these two schools of thoughts, educationists and linguists have formed many strategies such as using cooperative learning, ICT tools, literature and storytelling, etc.

Literature plays a vital role in language teaching and among all literary genres, the contribution of short stories for learning language skills, particularly listening skills, is worth discussing.

Listening skill

Listening is the first of the four basic skills of a language. When people are learning a first language, they first hear it spoken. Hearing is not listening, but a part of listening. It is a narrow term as compared to listening. Hearing is accidental, involuntary and effortless but listening is focussed, voluntary and intentional. Hearing means physically present but mentally absent, and listening means to be present both physically and mentally. According to Roland Barthes, "Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act." One of the main objectives of teaching English is to enable students to understand everyday English spoken at a normal pace.

To become a fluent speaker in English, one needs to develop strong listening skills. Many people say speaking is the most stressful part of learning a second language but it is not so as studies revealed that listening is the most stressful part. If someone is not a good listener then the person may not be a good

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speaker. On the contrary, a good listener may be a good speaker as well. Different studies point out that despite being the most important language skill, listening does not get full attention in language classes. "Listening skills in language teaching have been neglected and shifted to a secondary position after speaking and writing. This is a surprising fact given that it is the skill that is most often used in communication. It is thought that about forty per cent of our daily communication is spent on listening, thirty-five per cent on speaking, sixteen per cent on reading, and only nine per cent on writing" (Khorashadyzede, 2014).

Listening is categorised as active and passive. In active listening, the listeners pay 100 per cent attention. It includes hearing, interpreting, understanding, evaluating, responding and remembering. These can be called by its different stages. On the other hand, passive listening is not serious listening. It may be a formality only, where the listener is only listening subconsciously. The students should be exposed to listening to the English language, through:

- (a) lessons given by the teacher.
- (b) interaction among the students.
- (c) lectures given by prominent speakers.
- (d) English films for arranged in the school.
- (e) audio/video cassettes prepared by standard production houses.
- (d) short-stories of about five-ten minutes.

Using short stories for listening skills

Short story

A short story is a short fictional narrative prose with a few characters centred around one single event. In other words, it can be termed as 'a record of happenings' and 'the simplest form of fiction'. According to Collins English Dictionary, "A Short Story is a written story about imaginary events that is only a few pages long." It has an introduction, body and conclusion. It is a brief form of a novel but opposite in length, character and action,

etc. In the present day world, it is becoming more popular than the novel as it can be read in one sitting.

A short story is mostly narrated either in first person or third person. It is written in an easy language and in a point to point manner. Normally, a short story has two to four scenes and its ideal length is 2000-6000 words. The main purpose of a short story is to give a specific message within a limited time which is why it is written in limited length. A short story is interesting in nature and a good source of enjoyment and inspiration too. All these distinct features make it the most favourite form of reading and writing in modern age literature. Short stories are of various types – adventure, love story, detective, psychological, social, scientific, etc.

Short story supports listening elements

Ernest Hemingway, the famous American short story writer, strongly supports the listening process and says, "I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen." His statement depicts the relationship between a short story and listening.

Classroom observations to examine the role of short stories in teaching listening skills

The researcher has done some classroom observations to point out the magical effects of using short stories to improve the listening skill of learners. These observations were made in the elementary and secondary classes (Class 6 to 10) of English language in different schools of Kargil district. The age of these students were mostly 10 to 16 years. The researcher chose moral stories like 'The Greedy Dog', 'The Thirsty Crow', 'The Fox and the Grapes', 'The Golden Egg', etc. and read out any one at the beginning of every language class with the aim to motivate the learners as well as to enhance their listening skill. The researcher also used to tell another story in the same class to re-activate the de-motivated learners in rare cases. The duration of listening is five minutes and students have to listen and listen only.

Subsequently, the researcher has recorded the following points that reveal how short stories support listening skills.

- **Lively and enjoyable classroom:** When a teacher begins to tell a short story in class, the atmosphere of the classroom changes and every student is found involved in the listening process. They feel happy and enjoy both physically and psychologically. “The lively atmosphere and real life environment created by stories encourages the students to talk and discuss with each other. When telling and listening to a story, the learner will easily be plunged into the plots and the scene and forget about themselves, which will, to a great degree, relieve their nervousness” (Jianing, Xu. 2007).
- **Attract less motivated learners:** Short stories attract less motivated learners and maintain key physical signs of listening, such as eye contact of the students in class. As a result they also become good listeners. This trend helps them to improve their understanding, pronunciation, using intonation, words, sentence stress, etc.
- **Focus and attention:** “Listening is to pay attention to somebody or something that you can hear, to take notice of what somebody says” (Oxford Advance Learners Dictionary). It is observed that listening happens in an attentive and focussed situation only and a short story energises its audience to listen more and more with total attention. The students look attentive and relaxed while telling short stories in their classes.
- **Maintaining silence:** Listening flourishes better in a silent situation and silence is considered golden for the sake of listening. The words, ‘silent’ and ‘listen’ have the same letters and they are considered as two sides of the same coin. In this context, short stories are considered an effective tool for maintaining classroom silence in which listening happens in a meaningful way.
- **Interruption free class:** Frequent interruptions are not so good for the listening process and it is found that in short story classes, students interrupt less and cooperate more with their teachers. It makes interruption limited.
- **Promotes intention:** Learning listening skill is not possible without the listener’s intention. A short story proves a better tool to strengthen the intention of students to listen more and more.
- **Questioning skill:** A short story encourages students to ask questions, such as after that...?, and...?, please tell more...?, how is it so...?, what happens then...?, etc. These kind of questions indicate how much the students are involved in the listening process and these work as reinforcers rather than interrupters.
- **Verbal feedback:** Short stories promote the culture of providing feedback. Positive reinforcements, such as hmm, really, did that happen, etc. are mostly seen while storytelling. These sort of verbal feedbacks also satisfy the teachers that the students are conscious in listening.
- **Non-verbal feedback:** Non-verbal language like smiling, eye contact, correct body posture, etc. are also observed while telling stories. These are the appropriate responses and indications of the students’ involvement in listening too.
- **Sign of respect:** Listening is a sign of respect and it is seen at its peak in story telling classes. In such classes, every student tries to give utmost respect to their teachers, so that they may not be hurt and the storytelling process continues.
- **Promoting the culture of listening more:** Language learning depends on listening and short stories can be an input to practice language skills especially listening skills.

Story time is an important listening activity, which with the right support, helps children in building listening skills. Humans have two ears and one mouth for a reason and that is to listen more and talk less as James writes, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak” (1:19).

- **Confidence building for speaking:** One who is good at listening may be good at speaking also. It is commonly observed in language classes that after listening to a complete story in English or Urdu, the students look confident and begin to interact with the teacher in the respective language. It was a moment of thought for the teacher that the students were not so confident in speaking before the class.

Beside the above mentioned experiences, there may be many other benefits of short stories for the proper nurturing of listening skills and to remove the difficulties of listening. “If listening to stories becomes a habit, it can help them become better listeners as it provides them the necessary training to listen and understand more, while becoming aware of rhythm, intonation and pronunciation of the target language” (Brewster et al.).

Conclusion

It becomes clear that listening is the base of learning a second language and learning listening skill is a psychological process. So, different teachers use different strategies and techniques to strengthen the listening skill of students. But many studies disclose that storytelling or using short stories in language classes is the best technique for teaching language skills, especially listening skills, even in this digital era too. In addition to this, the classroom experiences and observations in the elementary and secondary schools of the northern most Indian district, Kargil (Ladakh), shared by the researcher also supports the fact that language teachers can reduce all kinds of barriers for teaching and learning of listening skills by using short stories or story telling technique. These barriers include physical barriers (noise, interruption and uncomfortable environment, etc.), psychological barriers (wandering attention, personal anxiety and negative attitude, etc.), and lingual barriers (poor listening, mispronouncing, delivery too fast or too slow, etc.). At the end of the day, it can be said that teachers and educators need to focus on improving the listening skills of students by using different techniques, especially story-telling.

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