

## **The listening and speaking challenge**

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### **Overview**

Teaching listening and speaking has recently been an important topic in the English Language Teaching (ELT) field in Sri Lanka as there has been criticism of not giving the necessary emphasis to teaching listening and speaking in school. Recently, steps have been taken to introduce listening and speaking assessment in the Sri Lankan schools. Thus, this topic received emphasis as one of the conference themes. Teaching listening and speaking in Sri Lanka is a challenge. It is questionable if the teachers have had the necessary training on teaching and assessing listening and speaking, if necessary physical resources (e.g. recording devices, players etc.) are widely available in schools and if modern teaching materials are available. However, this is also the best time to consider the content of listening and speaking instruction. In this paper, the current global trends on teaching pronunciation, listening and speaking are discussed. These need to be considered when planning the content of school curriculum in the new initiative to introduce listening and speaking assessment in Sri Lanka.

### **Pronunciation**

Since the early days of ELT, there has been a debate on the 'acceptable pronunciation model' and/or the accent. Native speaker accent/pronunciation has been used as the model and Received Pronunciation, or the RP has been the norm in ELT. However, when English became a global language, new varieties such as Indian English, Chinese English, and Singaporean English emerged. Today, English is considered a lingua franca, that is, a common language for people who speak different first languages (Jenkins, 2009). Globally, there are five times more non-native speakers who speak English than native speakers of English and thus the use of English has become more localised. With this, the concept of a common pronunciation model has been questioned. In the UK also, RP is receiving less emphasis and London based Estuary accent/pronunciation is becoming dominant (Wells, 1995). Estuary has features of middle-class pronunciation with some Cockney features. Thus, the prestige associated with RP is also diminishing.

In this global context, intelligibility of speech is considered more important than developing a particular accent or pronunciation model. An early study by Smith and Khalilullah (1979) highlighted that intelligibility does not have a relationship with native speaker pronunciation. In the study, Sri Lankan pronunciation became the most intelligible and the US pronunciation was among the least intelligible. Deterding and Lewis (2019) highlight four main features of English pronunciation that affect intelligibility. They are consonants, vowel length, consonant clusters and nuclear stress. Lingua Franca Core (LFC) proposed by Jenkins (2000) provides a common set

of core phonological features that help achieve maximum intelligibility, which also includes the four features Deterding and Lewis highlighted. Thus, today's teachers are expected to teach these core phonological features and expose their students to different accents as opposed to following a particular pronunciation model.

## Listening

Listening involves two processes: bottom-up and top-down. Bottom-up refers to processing information at the level of individual sounds, words and sentences and top-down involves using previous knowledge, known schema and contextual knowledge to infer meaning (Richards, 2009). Vandergriff and Tafaghodtari (2010) argue that the typical pre-while-post listening lesson does not really teach students how to use bottom-up and top-down processing strategies, instead, focuses more on comprehension checking. Thus, they propose a process-based listening lesson in which learners are given the opportunity to explore listening strategies. It includes several peer discussion stages on 'how to listen'. In their study, which compared the effectiveness of the traditional pre-while-post lesson and process-based lesson, Vandergriff and Tafaghodtari found out that those who were taught using the process approach outperformed the others. In particular, less skilled listeners showed greater improvement when using process approach. These findings indicate that teachers need to explicitly teach both bottom-up and top-down listening strategies to learners.

## Speaking

In most coursebooks, the speaking examples given appear to be less authentic. For example, important features of natural speech such as backchannelling, pauses, hesitations, repetitions, discourse markers, fillers, revisions, false starts and deixis are omitted in the speaking samples. However, these features are regularly present in one's first language speech and should not be ignored in teaching second language speech. Thus, it is important for teachers to bring in authentic speaking samples to class and, also most importantly, highlight these natural features of speech. Several methods of teaching speaking can be found in literature. When speaking, the speaker first conceptualises the message to be conveyed, then formulates what is to be said in the mind and then articulation takes place (Bygate, 2011). In order to capture this process, The Teaching Speaking Cycle has been proposed by Goh and Burns (2012). In this cycle, first, learners' attention is drawn to the speaking task and they are encouraged to plan what they would utter. After the speaking task, learners' attention is drawn to the language items and strategies that they struggled with while performing the task. Such features are then taught, and the speaking task is repeated. Finally, learners are encouraged to reflect on their performance. Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011), who made their participants plan and/or repeat a speaking task found that the group who did both planning and repetition was able to increase fluency, accuracy and complexity of the speech. This indicates that it is important to give time for learners to plan speaking, repeat speaking tasks and discuss speaking strategies with them.

## Conclusion

As discussed so far, the current status of English in the world demands teachers to go beyond traditional teaching methods in teaching pronunciation, listening and speaking. The most important feature is to teach listening/speaking strategies, in other words, show learners 'how to' listen and speak. In this process, learners are encouraged to analyse and explore listening and speaking problems they encounter, evaluate the learning process, learn collaboratively and take responsibility of their learning. In other words, learners are treated as explorers and learner autonomy is encouraged. It is

also important to show learners that their local accent/pronunciation does no harm to them but developing intelligibility of speech is important. More exposure to world Englishes will make learners ready to communicate effectively in the current English as a Lingua Franca community.

## References

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