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REVISITING THE TEACHING OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION TO INTERPRETERS-TO-BE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CIENFUEGOS

UNA MIRADA A LA ENSEÑANZA DE LA COMPRESIÓN AUDITIVA PARA LOS INTÉRPRETES EN FORMACIÓN EN LA UNIVERSIDAD DE CIENFUEGOS

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RESUMEN

Teaching listening comprehension in a foreign language has been a research focus in the last twenty years. However, studying this language skill to enhance the development of a professional skill in interpreters is not widely found in literature. This study establishes some pedagogical implications for the development of listening for interpreting purposes. It describes the results of a research conducted at the University of Cienfuegos, aiming at providing professors with a didactic overview of how listening comprehension could be developed with a specific purpose. This research was part of a doctorate program in Teaching conducted by the author.

Palabras clave:

Listening comprehension, interpreters, listening comprehension for interpreting purposes.

ABSTRACT

La enseñanza de la comprensión auditiva en lenguas extranjeras ha sido objeto de investigación en los últimos veinte años. Sin embargo, el estudio de esta habilidad desde una perspectiva profesional para los intérpretes no es ampliamente abordada en la literatura. Este estudio establece algunas implicaciones pedagógicas para el desarrollo de la comprensión auditiva en función de la interpretación. Además, describe los resultados de una investigación realizada en la Universidad de Cienfuegos, dirigida a proporcionar a los profesores un modelo didáctico para el tratamiento de la comprensión auditiva con este fin profesional. Esta investigación fue parte de un programa doctoral en pedagogía conducido por su autor.

Keywords:

Comprensión auditiva, intérpretes, comprensión auditiva en función de la interpretación.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, listening comprehension has been considered as a basic language skill to be developed in the foreign language classroom. Authors such as: Rixon (1989); Rost (2001, 2011); Park (2004); Xiaohui (2005); Pazokizadeh (2013); Abreus (2014, 2015), have conducted research about listening, mainly addressed to the development of listening comprehension as a cognitive process, and as a linguistic skill.

Park (2004), for example, developed a model for listening comprehension (Interactive Process Model) where bottom-up and top-down processes are synthesized. According to Abreus & Carballosa (2014ab), Park's interactive process model does not comprise taking into consideration neither the sociocultural characteristics of the communication context nor the paralinguistic elements of discourse in oral communication. These last two elements could be necessary for interpreters to render a message in a target language as part of the interpreting process. Furthermore, Xiaohui (2005), presented a Relevance-based Strategic Model for listening comprehension where the input process is described taking into consideration linguistic and non-linguistic factors opposed to the previous expectations of the listener. However, Xiaohui's model (2005), does not imply that the listener conveys the meaning of an oral message in a different language.

Some theorists consider that listening comprehension development is not directly linked to the training of interpreters. However, after many years having taught interpreting at the University of Cienfuegos, we have found that one of the key factors to develop an accurate interpreting process is a well-developed listening skill in students.

After analyzing various models and frameworks for listening comprehension, we can conclude that is not common to find research in which listening comprehension is addressed to as a professional language skill in the training of foreign language interpreters. Accordingly, the main findings in this field are provided by Torres (2008), and recently updated by Abreus (2015). These two authors make an emphasis on didactic implications for the teaching of listening comprehension for interpreting purposes.

The study conducted by Abreus (2015), specifically addressed the following research questions, which are revisited in this article:

- What theoretical background can be considered to support the teaching of listening comprehension for interpreting purposes?
- How can a didactic framework improve the teaching of listening comprehension in the training of interpreters?

- How can interpreting students perceive the importance of developing listening comprehension with a professional purpose?

The research conducted by Abreus aimed at providing a didactic framework for the development of listening comprehension for interpreting purposes in the training of interpreters. This framework has been introduced into the teaching practice for the last three academic years, and the current article aims at describing the main findings after the implementation of Abreus' framework.

Literature Review

As previously stated, listening comprehension has been studied as a linguistic skill rather than as a professional skill in the training of interpreters. The main concepts used by the researcher to define listening comprehension for interpreting purposes were analyzed from general literature related to the teaching of listening comprehension in a foreign language. Thus, listening comprehension refers to the processes of understanding the spoken language (Masoumeh 2016), and includes understanding speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax in sentences (Nadig 2013). Furthermore, Nadig (2013), considers that developing listening comprehension demands the use of significant memory to keep the track of the messages conveyed during discourse.

Another definition of listening is provided by Sariçoban (1999). This author states that listening comprehension refers to the skill of identifying and comprehending what other people convey through oral discourse, and implies perceiving the accent, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary the sender has used. In addition, understanding the meaning of what is conveyed is relevant during the development of this skill.

Moreover, Rost (2001), considers that listening comprehension is the coordination of all the skill components, and not only isolated units. Thus, for this author listening implies discriminating among sounds, recognizing words, and identifying the word grammar groups they belong to Rost (2001). More recently, Rost (2011), also stated that listening comprehension is a process in which the receiver comprehends what the sender actually said, constructs and represents meaning, negotiates the meaning with the sender, and responds to communication and creates meaning through participation, imagination, and empathy.

Based on the aforementioned concepts we can state that listening comprehension involves a sender, a spoken message, and a receiver in order to take place. However, this sender and receiver are considered as at least two individuals who communicate in the same language, or may

refer to an individual trying to understand a message that has been conveyed in a foreign language, and which response is going to happen in the language they are trying to understand.

This situation normally happens in a foreign language classroom when learners are prompted to develop listening skills. Nonetheless, the scenario is different when the receiver has to develop accurate listening skills to work as an interpreter in the future; and thus convey the meaning they have understood in a different language to the one in which they had access to the spoken input.

The latest describes a common scenario that interpreters encounter in their everyday professional contexts. Thus, revisiting the way in which listening comprehension in a foreign language is taught in the training of interpreters is a major concern in this research.

Teaching listening comprehension for interpreting purposes involves many of the stages and elements described by Sariçoban (1999); Rost (2001, 2011); Nadig (2013); Masoumeh (2016); and but also implies developing good memory skills that allow interpreters render a message in a different language, which is not habitual when foreign language learners develop listening comprehension just for communication purposes. Thus, Abreus (2015), presents a conceptualization of listening comprehension for interpreting purposes that goes beyond the elements stated by these authors to provide an integral and professional-focused view of listening comprehension. This definition states that: listening comprehension for interpreting purposes is the linguistic skill which involves perceiving, decoding, and interpreting oral symbols; remembering their meaning; and re-expressing this meaning in an immediate oral form in a target language (L2) that is different to the source language (L1) (Abreus, 2015).

In order to fulfil this, special attention is paid to the linguistic and paralinguistic elements present in a determined sociocultural context (Abreus, 2015).

This research also presents a set of actions teachers and students should take into account for developing listening comprehension for interpreting purposes, which could be considered as a path to understanding and proposing modifications to the theory behind listening comprehension development for interpreting purposes.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted following a qualitative methodology, specifically using a descriptive method. Observation and other qualitative techniques were used to collect and analyze the data in the study. The sample was 48 students

majoring in Interpreting at the University of Cienfuegos (2013-2019).

In order to implement the actions stated in the Interpreting lessons, the author considered pedagogical implications for each of the stages of the listening process. Some of these actions were determined after conducting observations to Interpreting lessons, and the author explored the inclusion in these lessons of aspects related to the development of listening comprehension for this professional purpose. These criteria are:

- Working with extra-linguistic and paralinguistic mechanisms during the communicative act that is comprehended, and re-expressed
- Analyzing the multiple contexts in which communication takes place
- Taking into account the variety of accents, rhythms, and intonations depending on the region the English speaking people come from
- Working with language registers that are used by speakers
- Providing practice to train the short-term and long-term memories in the Interpreting lessons

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During all observations (64 total), the researcher registered the behaviour and efforts made by the students in the Interpreting lessons, so that conclusions could be drawn about the pertinence and feasibility of the actions proposed.

During observation, the researcher could exactly describe the facts that took place in the observed lessons. Accordingly, the author also described the learning situations related to the development of listening skills, as well as the interactions with others while completing the interpreting tasks.

The observer corroborated the increase in students' accurate development of listening skills for interpreting purposes. A comparison between the amount of students who were able to develop listening skills with a professional purpose before and after the implementation of the research findings was developed.

As stated before, participants in the research were 48 students majoring in Interpreting; however, it is necessary to highlight that the 2013 class was observed before Abreus' framework was implemented, and the 2014 class was that in which the framework was first introduced. The 2018 class fully introduced the implications determined by Abreus in his framework, and they represent the final comparative point through which comparisons are

established. The amount of students in each class taking part throughout the whole study is the following (Table 1).

Table 1. Student distribution by classes.

Class	Students enrolled
2013-2014	16
2014-2015	20
2018-2019	12

Using the criteria above mentioned, the author observed Interpreting lessons to make a comparative analysis among the three classes taking part in the study. These results are presented in figure 1.

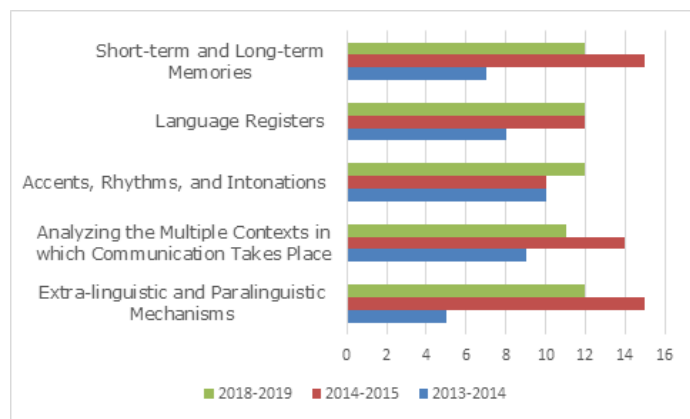


Figure 1. Results after conducting observation.

The increase of students' performance in interpreting after having developed listening comprehension as a professional skill is a fact. A comparative analysis of the results in Figure 1 shows that working with extra-linguistic and paralinguistic mechanisms during the communicative act that is comprehended and re-expressed increased in a 68.7 % from the 2013 class to the 2018 class. Accordingly, the analysis of the multiple contexts in which communication takes place, increased in a 13.8%, from the 2013 class to the 2014 class (56.2% to 70%), and continued to increase from 70 % in the 2014 class to a 91.65 in the 2018 class. This demonstrates that continuous expose to the different contexts in which English is spoken, sometimes even by non-native speakers of the language, provides the students with the possibilities of identifying better the contexts, and therefore the linguistic variation of language they need to re-express.

As for the variety of accents, rhythms, and intonations used in every linguistic variation, the percentage of accuracy in the re-expression stage increased in a 37.5% (from 62.5% in 2013 to 100% in 2018). Furthermore, language registers used by speakers were identified by 100% of

students in the 2018 class, after having been identified only by 50% of the students in the 2013 class, and 60% of the students in the 2014 class.

Finally, the training of short-term and long-term memory while developing listening comprehension in favor of interpreting increased from 43.7% in 2013 to 100% in 2018.

The main findings resulting from the observation sessions were:

- It was possible to confirm that the recognition of the paralinguistic elements of communication (rhythm, intonation and accent of the speaker in the oral discourse) allowed the students to maintain the register, tone and communicative intention of the oral message understood when re-expressing the message. This is mainly because the memory exercises developed allowed them to decode and recode the information with the agility required by the interpreting process, and therefore, the result of the post-listening stage was effective.
- The researcher observed the use of bottom-up and top-down strategies for listening comprehension, and their use by students with the appropriate guidance and orientation of the teacher. This enabled the establishment of references about what students listened to, and the summary of elements for the contextualization of phrases or words related to the content of the message, in order to facilitate listening comprehension.
- The teachers, making sure that the students knew the objective of the task prior to the exposure to the message to be re-expressed, carried out an adequate orientation towards the listening activity.
- In 87% of the tasks that were observed, the recoding of the message had to be carried out from Spanish to English and vice versa, which demonstrates the bilateral nature of interpreting, and therefore, of the listening comprehension process for this specific purpose.
- In all cases, the teachers provided students with opportunities to personalize the teaching learning of listening comprehension, as they fostered the establishment of relationships between the information provided by the oral texts and their personal experiences. This allowed the students to understand better the message and to go through each of the phases of listening comprehension.

The above mentioned allowed the researcher corroborate the pedagogical implications for all stages of listening comprehension development stated by Abreus (2015), and include some others, so that interpreting students could master a skill they need for their future professional development. These implications include:

Pre-listening stage

Selecting and analysing the listening material according to the objectives set

Activating students' background knowledge about the topic and the linguistic content of the listening material (this could be done using pictures, graphics, mid-maps, etc.)

Analysing the sociocultural information present in the material, so that comprehension is easier for the student

- Prompting group discussions around the topic the listening material presents, so that they become familiar with functions, and structures studied to express their ideas of what they comprehended.
- Using prediction to determine the content of the material and favour its comprehension.
- Using maps, diagrams, or graphics with visual information to activate and reinforce vocabulary building.
- Activating the use of strategies to predict the content of the material, establishing reference of what students are listening to, and summarize.
- Contextualizing phrases and words related to the content of the listening material
- Making semantic networks (graphic organization of concepts and words that are related) so that a logical graphic order of concepts eases comprehension.

Listening stage

- Developing a proper orientation towards the listening task, making sure students know what they have to complete in each task before they listen to the material.
- Developing activities to develop short-term memory and long-term memory.
- Having the students develop activities where they have to distinguish between the use of formal and informal language registers.
- Developing activities where students have to summarize the content of the listening message using drawings, abstraction or other types of design that train their memory skills.
- Post-listening stage.
- Assessing aspects related to content and form (monologues, dialogs, formal, informal) of the spoken language.
- Analysing of the paralinguistic features present in the listening material.
- Promoting self-assessment of students listening comprehension.

CONCLUSIONS

The review of literature around the teaching of listening comprehension for interpreting purposes in the training of interpreters served as theoretical bases for the establishment of the pedagogical implications presented. They represent the dynamics of the relationships among the stages for listening comprehension development, based on the cognitive-communicative and socio-cultural aspects present in the oral discourse. Likewise, these implications are characterized by their flexible nature. The practical validity of Abreus' framework was verified through the application of the actions corresponding to the three stages for its implementation and evaluation from 2013-2019, which allowed corroborating the effectiveness of the proposal for the development of listening comprehension for interpreting purposes. The increase in students' performance from the 2013 class to the 2018 class was evident and observed throughout the research conduction.

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