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**THE LEVEL OF AURAL COMPREHENSION OF AMERICAN ENGLISH
AMONG EFL SALVADORAN LEARNERS**

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INTRODUCTION

This graduation paper is the result of a bibliographical research which has lasted half a year; and it has the purpose to contribute to developing the listening skill in learners of the English Language. The whole work is composed by eight elements such as: introduction, objectives, justification, the essay, methodology, recommendations, bibliography, and webibliography. The introduction is a brief summary about what the essay would be about. The objectives are the ones set before starting the essay because they were the guidelines to develop it. On the part of justification, we have mentioned the benefits of the research and the benefitees and also the importance of the topic to the community. The body of this paper, which has been written as an essay deals with the way how the socio-cultural aspects hinder Salvadoran learners when learning English as a foreign language; here are given concrete aspects of the problem as well as the solution. The recommendations are just some advice given by the researchers. These are just based on the conclusion reached by the researchers. As to the methodology, the book "Literature Review" has been followed to do the essay. Then the bibliography and webibliography are the books and articles listed at the end of the work.

To finish with, we hope this paper can help educators and learners pay close attention to listening as well as improving the teaching – learning of it.

OBJECTIVES

General:

- To determine the difference between the development of listening comprehension out of the context and the acquisition of listening one in context.

Specific:

- To establish the main reasons why it is difficult the listening comprehension in the countries where the language studied is not spoken.
- To analyze the influence of non-context environment in the developing of listening comprehension for EFL Salvadoran learners in order to develop listening activities based on the students' necessities.

JUSTIFICATION

This research is very important to understand the importance of listening as part of the learning process in the acquisition of a second language since listening is the first language mode that children acquire in the mother tongue. It provides the foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a life-long role in the processes of communication. A study by Wilt (1950), found that people listen 45 % of the time they spend communicating. This study is still widely cited (e.g., Martin, 1987; Strother, 1987). Wilt found that 30 % of communication time was spent speaking, 16 % reading, and 9 % writing (Guo & Wills, 2004). Any learner at the very beginning needs to be exposed around the clock. So, foreign language learners must be exposed in a great manner to listening comprehension.

This research would benefit teachers as well as students in the way they see listening, and how they can take advantage of listening. Generally foreign language educators pay little attention to listening. Now is the time to do it because listening is really fundamental by the time we communicate. Knowing the strategies, and activities as well as the difficulties that students face in the listening, it is necessary to take into account what is developed in this essay. It can help to improve the listening performance for foreign language educators and learners through it.

This essay can be taken as a referential framework since here are exposed the proper characteristics of the English language to put them into practice when teaching and learning English as well as the difficulties are explained here to overcome this issue. The most important contribution is that here is a bibliographical essay to be expanded by future learners.

The Level of Aural Comprehension of American English among EFL Salvadoran Learners

Learning a language means to master the four macro-skills, which are writing, reading, speaking and listening. They are essential to be able to communicate. Nowadays, the main concern in the learning of the English language is listening comprehension (Hayati, 2009). Americans have different accents from one state to another. This is due in part of the influence of the different cultures that settled in the United States. That is the reason why American English has certain ways of speaking that differ from one area to another. Because of this, Salvadoran learners face disadvantages when they try to learn English in EFL context in that there are many variants of the spoken language. So the level of aural comprehension for EFL Salvadoran Learners in American English hinders when the socio-cultural linguistic aspects are not acquired in a natural way.

The socio-cultural aspects are very important when learners try to comprehend American speakers. However, English for EFL Salvadoran learners lacks the above mentioned, which are important to convey as well as to understand the spoken messages. So, when a Salvadoran learner who has studied and learned English in a foreign context and goes to the United States, he/she encounters many problems and one of them is listening comprehension. Therefore, his English does not become effective because foreign English learners are not aware of American English socio-cultural elements.

The acquisition of English as a mother tongue differs from learning it as a foreign language. In fact, learners can acquire the language by osmosis, a gradual process in which information and ideas influence you without you realizing it, (Mendelssohn, 1984) the language is acquired in a real context but when a learner is trying to get the language out of the context, this one faces the issue that his learning is weak. Since when he imitates the language, he

imitates his peers and his teacher; then taking into account that they are not native, his English does not become very effective. The result is that learner's English listening comprehension will be affected by his surroundings. It is believed that if students listen to the target language all day, they will improve their listening skill through the experience (Osada, 2004). O'Grady, Dobrovolsky and Aronoff (1989) hold that the best way to improve foreign language learner's linguistic ability is through the exposure to comprehensible input. Input is indispensable for language acquisition. Nevertheless, in an EFL context the exposition to foreign language is scarce, unless students make use of the technological resources such as cable T.V, internet, etc. This one can be less hard to achieve.

In an EFL context, educators should emphasize more on listening in order to improve students' listening performance. As Smojver (2007) says, in a foreign context, EFL listening is a more demanding language skill than in the mother tongue. It is often considered to be qualitatively different because the language studied is nonexistent in the environment. As a result, learner's limited knowledge of the foreign language and non-native exposition makes learner not understand the message of the foreign language. During the complex process of understanding, the listener has to process the input when he is exposed both outside and in classroom. So, listening plays a crucial role in students' language development.

The EFL Salvadoran learners have difficulties when they are in the process to acquire the English language. Rixon (1986) insists that there are four main areas of listening difficulty for an EFL learner. They are the English structures with the weak relationship between sounds and the meaning of language expressions in the context; changes in the sounds when they occur in rapid, connected speech with various tones; the rhythm pattern of speech and different ways of pronouncing the same sound. On the other hand, Ur in his article "*Listening Comprehension*" classifies listening difficulties of the EFL learners into several categories as follows: the problem of sounds which include pronunciation, rhythm, intonation and stress; lack of exposure with different

kinds of accents and colloquial vocabulary in specific texts, inability to link words to the context, and unskillful in using strategies to summarize heard information at the macro-level and micro-level (Lou & Qi, 2005).

Pronunciation in listening comprehension has a big impact for developing aural comprehension. Thus, we have to bear in mind that listening comprehension is not an isolated skill. It requires substantially different micro-skills as pronunciation because “the sound system of the second language poses a significant problem” (Lund, 1991, p. 201). When students listen to an American English song or a movie, some of them do not recognize certain words that they already know, because they have troubles in listening comprehension. They have not been taught how to understand the spoken message as the way it is. In fact, listeners must identify a flow of speech by recognizing irregular pauses, false starts, hesitations, stress, and intonation patterns to be able to understand (Osada, 2004). Guo and Wills (2004) reported, “When students’ pronunciation knowledge is inadequate, their capacity to discriminate will be weak and affect listening comprehension.” So the first step of listening comprehension is learning how to identify sounds. Thus pronunciation knowledge must be developed properly so that students face less trouble in listening comprehension.

The ability to correctly identify sounds related to words and at the same time words that form sentences is a listening problem for an EFL listener (Rixon, 1986). Nonetheless, the sole knowledge of the pronunciation of the words does not allow him to have the appropriate comprehension of the spoken language. When a sound is difficult to recognize, listening comprehension is then difficult too. So, having the knowledge of the context is very useful to understand the language studied. This is crucial for a listener to decide what an utterance means. In fact, a listener confronts many dimensions of comprehension when processing speech. The act of speaking imposes a particular form on utterance and this considerably affects the listener on how he understands the message.

Learning to recognize native English pronunciation is essential for EFL learners. It is recognized by Wipf (1984) that listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures; interpret stress and intonation; understand intention as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance (Guo and Wills, 2004). But Wipf is referring to listeners when their native language is English. However, when EFL Salvadoran learners try to decode a message such as an audio program, a film, a lecture or a conversation said by a native speaker, they cannot understand it. If they are not familiar with the elements above mentioned, the message is cut off. So knowing pronunciation of EFL isolated words is an important aspect to understand the language.

EFL listeners face the problem that they cannot control the speed of delivery in the English language. Underwood (1989) says, "Many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension, as opposed to reading comprehension, is that the listeners cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks" (Osada, 2004). However, the impression of fast and slow speech of American English in general is the result from lack of practice on the spoken language. In fact, in no language and not even in English language there exists fast speech. This impression is the product of the way in how the language was learned. That is, the Salvadoran learners have been accustomed most of the time to listening to a slow and emphasized language. Consequently, this provokes misunderstanding between a native English speaker and EFL Salvadoran learner.

There are a number of reasons why it is hard to understand American speakers: First, the student is taught to speak slowly and clearly and his teacher generally addresses the class in a public style which is clear and slow. Second, native speakers most of the time do not speak slowly or clearly because their speech is affected by certain phenomena as word formation, articulatory processes, etc. Third, the students are often exposed only to one accent of English, the one spoken by their teachers (*Hechavarría & Sánchez, 2000 ¶ 10*).

then, teachers must focus on delivering the speech fast and with native elements of the foreign language.

Another important component that affects aural comprehension for an EFL Salvadoran listener is the characteristics that a normal American speech has as pauses, hesitations, false starts, and corrections made by the native English speaker. One type of pause is the “planning pause”, where the speaker is assumed to be constructing the next part of what she or he is going to say, or is searching for a word that is difficult to retrieve. Hesitation is generally understood to be involuntary, and often due to the need to plan what the speaker is going to say next. Hesitations are also often the result of difficulty in recalling a word or expression. The fact is that the Salvadoran learner not only has to struggle with what a speaker is saying, but he also has to try to connect the ideas disordered in the message.

Usually EFL Salvadoran learners are used to listening to the English language in a strong form, when the English words are pronounced in isolation and influenced by the first language. This kind of English causes misunderstanding when he or she strikes a conversation with an American English speaker; since the latter uses his language in a natural way. That is, he only uses the reduced forms written in the textbooks. Some reduced forms are not written in Standard English in certain cases. Here are some examples of this kind of unfamiliar language unknown for a Salvadoran learner, but they are very common in everyday speech of American English such as: because /kʌz/, bet you /betcha/, what is the matter- /wassammatta/, should have /shudav/, etc. Thus, when an EFL Salvadoran listens to any of these reduced forms, he doesn't comprehend what it is said.

When a learner begins studying the English language, the first pronunciation the students learn is the strong form of the English one. Since the EFL listener is not immersed in the foreign language, he can think that the English spoken message is fast. While in fact it is not speed of the native speaker but lack of discrimination of sounds and other features (Hasan, 2000).

In this situation, a student cannot recognize the words because they sound different in a native speaker's speech. That is, a native speaker expresses his ideas with a weak pronunciation, affecting the comprehension of the listener since the latter has not learned to speak the way a native speaker has.

Any language has rhythm and stress. It is necessary to take into consideration that both aspects differ from the English language to the Spanish one. Speech is perceived as a sequence of events in time, and the rhythm is used to refer to the way events are distributed in time. In conversational speech the rhythms are vastly more complicated, but it is clear that the timing of speech is not at random. The length of time to sound a word in English is in direct relation to the number of syllables the utterance has. Within an utterance particular syllables are stressed according to what is required to communicate. In English the position of stress can change the meaning of a word, as in the case of 'import' (noun) and 'import' (verb), and so it forms part of the phonological composition of the word. Then, if the EFL Salvadoran learner was taught to stress a word mistakenly, when he listens to a word pronounced correctly in an utterance, he would lose the thread of the conversation. This adds another issue to the listener's comprehension because he who has learned English as a foreign language is generally aware about an only sound for each word.

Teachers need to look for techniques and activities more appropriate to induce students to understand the real language like conversations in CD's and films. This can be achieved through the micro-skills, which are rarely applied or explained by them to get the gist of what is said orally. For example, with the technique of keywords (LinguaLinks Library, 1998 ¶ 3), teachers can explain students to get the main point of any listening activity. If they pay attention to key words, they can have a better global idea what the topic is about, but this strategy should be hinted by teachers first before starting the class.

Salvadoran learners' phonological knowledge does not suffice when they listen to spoken messages, which is essential for comprehension in American English. That is, when a native speaker asks something and the student

understands part of the message, he is not going to be able to communicate naturally because he is hesitating about what he heard. So he could ask to repeat what has been asked, but the second time will be practice of listening, just like in class. (Hechavarria & Sánchez, 2000).

The EFL Salvadoran learners have to take into account the different American English accents to be able to communicate with native English speakers. Every language has its variants of pronunciation as well as the accent. An accent has its own characteristics in the oral discourse. This is highly essential when trying to understand a language. According to Jeremy Harmer (2003) one of the main reasons for getting students to listen to spoken English is to let them hear different varieties and accents rather than just the voice of their teacher with his own style.

American English has many phonological varieties that make it difficult to comprehend. They make use of elision, contraction, juncture, liaison, register, etc. (Lynch, 2008 ¶ 4). In American English this common phenomenon happens very often. They usually omit sounds either in spoken or written discourse; example: /kəmɹə/ “camera”, *cuppa tea* “cup of tea”, *cats 'n dogs* “cats and dogs”. Or they can link sounds for example they pronounce the letter *r* only in certain cases such as (e.g. ‘the car is’ ðə kɑ_r ɪz) –this is done to link the words without sliding the two vowels together (Roach, 2009). But how these situations could happen in a foreign context? almost never, because it is hard to find or meet American English speakers. However, this person would speak politely. That is, he would use the strong form, which differs from the way they speak in daily speech, so the exposure of spoken English is basically remote.

It is really decisive to take into account certain aspects of American English such as articulatory processes. These are important by the time American English spoken message is delivered. Assimilation, dissimilation, deletion, and epenthesis are very common in American English. Assimilation is the result from the influence of one segment (and individual speech sound) on another and it always results from a sound becoming more like another nearby

sound. In informal speech, many English speakers pronounce words such as: *inconsequential* and *inconsiderate* with [ŋ] where the spelling shows [n]. However, dissimilation is the opposite of assimilation and it is the result of two sounds becoming less alike in articulatory or acoustic terms. An example of dissimilation in English occurs in words ending with three consecutive fricatives, such as *fifths* and *mouths*. Many speakers dissimilate the final [fəʃ] sequence to [fts] (O'Grady et al., 1989). Learners expect to understand every word, and when he or she encounters these situations, the communication cuts off.

Another important element, in the comprehension of American English, is deletion. This is a process that removes a segment from a certain phonetic contexts. It occurs in everyday rapid speech in many languages. In English, a schwa [ə] is often deleted when the next vowel in the word is stressed: This occurs as an alternative to dissimilation in a word such as *fifths*. Many speakers delete the [ə] of the final consonant cluster and say [fifs]. In very rapid speech, both [f] and [ə] are sometimes deleted resulting in [fis]. Epenthesis is a process that inserts a vowel or a consonant within an existing string of segments. For example, in careful speech, the words *prince* and *wince* are pronounced [prɪns] and [wɪns]; it is common in casual speech for speakers to insert a [t] between the *n* and the *s* and pronounce the words [prɪnts] and [wɪnts] (O'Grady et al., 1989). There are people who are not aware of these aspects and therefore, the level of comprehension is not the appropriate for having a natural conversation with a native speaker.

It is known that in common American speech it is very usual that speakers make use of clipping, acronyms, blends etc by the time they speak. Those phonological aspects are very important when learners try to comprehend American speakers. Clipping is a process whereby a new word is credited by shortening a polysyllabic word. This process, which seems especially popular among students, has yielded forms such as *prof* for professor, *phys-ed* for physical education, *ad* for advertisement, and *poli-sci* for political science. Also there are abbreviations that have been accepted in

general usage: doc, auto, lab, sub, bike, porn, burger, condo, etc. Acronyms are formed from the initial sounds or letters of a string of words such as the name of an organization or a scientific expression. Some examples of acronyms include AIDS for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, NASA for National Aeronautics and Space Administration, RADAR for radio detecting and ranging, and SNAFU for situation normal all fouled up (O'Grady et al., 1989). When an EFL learner faces one of these aspects, he catches an incomplete message; then he does not understand the meaning.

Also, in the oral expression there exists blending of words which are very used by native American speakers. That is, words that are created from parts of two already existing lexical items. Some examples of blends are *chortle* from *chuckle* and *snort*; *galumph* from *gallop* and *triumph*; *smog* from *smoke* and *fog*; *heliport* from *helicopter* and *airport*, etc. The origin of many American English words are no longer transparent for example *Vaseline* is a word that was based on German *wasser* "water" and Greek *elaion* "oil" and that is the way it was born (O'Grady et al., 1989). However, in EFL context this kind of phenomenon is barely exposed. Students have artificial input in their classes; the close real input they are usually exposed to is the one from the textbook, which is not an everyday speech style, it lacks the elements mentioned above. Therefore, the comprehension will be decreased for lack of word formation phenomenon as well as for the exposure.

Pragmatics plays an important role in language. It is part of linguistics and studies the way in which the context contributes to the meaning. That is, when an EFL Salvadoran learner assimilates the English language without the part of the context, he is only learning the language halfway. Therefore, much of the information shared in a conversation, in a lecture or in any other kind of means of communication will be lost since the pragmatics comes only through experience.

There are some socio cultural linguistic aspects that lack when teaching such as: 1) Strong pronunciation is only used; 2) it is spoken so slowly; 3) simple verbs are used rather than phrasal verbs; 4) a few idiomatic expressions

are used; 5) the EFL Salvadoran learner is rarely informed about the false cognates (words that seem like meaning the same as in Spanish but they are not); 6) it has not been learned in the true context, so, the real shades of the language have not been acquired; 7) it is not taught to make word combinations, expressing, therefore, inappropriate combinations; 8) the learner has not taken into account that it is a distinct language and thus the way to express the thinking is very different; and 9) it has not been insisted on the differentiation of the usage of the words. Therefore, it is advisable when teaching English to try to focus on all of these aspects to achieve a good performance in listening understanding.

In summary, the best way to improve foreign language learners' linguistic ability is through the exposure to lots of comprehensible input. In fact, in EFL context it is almost impossible to have real input so the comprehension of the foreign language is more difficult. Also EFL listeners' phonological knowledge does not suffice to discriminate between the pronunciation of vowels, consonants, sentences, and discourses. The socio-cultural context where the foreign language is developed is essential to properly have aural comprehension. Ur classifies difficulties of EFL learners into several categories as follows; the problem of sounds, which include pronunciation rhythm, intonation, and stress with the different kinds of accents and colloquial vocabulary. Besides, these different American English varieties are important disadvantages in the acquisition of listening comprehension because we are not in the real context. It is known that in the United States there are certain accents as well as dialects that have their own characteristics. Americans usually make use of elision, contraction, juncture, liaison, register, word-formation, articulatory processes, etc. In short, all these elements should be taken into account by Salvadoran teachers in a listening class which is strongly important to make students increase listening performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon this research which is important for both teachers and students we, the researchers, recommend the following to be put into practice:

1. Teachers should devote more time to listening activities in the class.
2. They also need to bring authentic audio-lingual resources in the classrooms such as CD's with different varieties of accents.
3. They should hint what students must pay attention to before starting to play a CD.
4. Students should be aware of certain phonological aspects so that they can discriminate sounds by the time they get to listen.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

To carry out this research it was necessary to get different information about listening such as history, theories, research, new publications, etc. The information was taken out from books, internet, magazines, newspapers, etc. After reading about listening, the researchers needed to delimit the topic since it was too wide. To develop this research systematically the researchers were guided by the book the Literature Review by Lawrence A. Machi & Brendat T. McEvoy, in this book there were six steps to follow such as Select the Topic, Search the Literature, Develop the Argument, Survey the Literature, Critique the Literature, and write the review.

To obtain a researchable topic researchers had to follow all the instructions of step one. After doing all the reading of step one, the next one was step two Search the Literature, here it was necessary to classify the information obtained. It involves three stages of previewing, selecting, and organizing literature for possible inclusion in the literature review. There are three techniques that helped researchers in conducting the research: Scanning, skimming, and mapping in order to do the bibliographic entry cards, from books, articles, theses, etc. to support the arguments in the essay.

The next step was step three, Develop the Argument. In this step the researchers looked for the relevant and credible data to provide strong evidence to present the claim. The evidence that supported the claims was the various studies cited in the essay. Step four, Survey the Literature. The literature survey gathers the prior knowledge about the subject. Surveying was done in three stages, assemble the collected data, synthesize the information and analyze the patterns of the data. Step five, Critique the Literature. A literature critique interprets the current understanding about the topic of research and determines how this knowledge answers the research question. This process was done in order to do the thesis statement. The next and the last step that was followed is the step six, Write the Review. Now researchers have completed the research and developed a research case. The background information is organized,

interpreted, analyzed, and developed arguments and done some exploratory writing. All of these steps were followed to accomplish the essay.

Since the essay was argumentative, it was important to obtain information in favor and as well against listening based on the position taken in the essay. Also, advisories were essential to develop the essay. Once a week there was a meeting with the advisor to show the progress of the research; also to know if the direction of the research was the correct way. The first stage of the research was the presentation of the profile; then the first draft, followed by the second draft. After that, the researchers presented the final report revised and without any mistakes of spelling, cohesion, and coherence.

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