

## Some Issues in Teaching Listening Skills to Language Learners

*This article will mainly explain some vital issues that need to be considered by teachers when teaching listening skills to language learners. Before this, firstly, it will shortly emphasise what was going on two decades ago for the sake of teaching listening skills, and whether practically it has changed a lot since then. Secondly it will indicate what our teaching objectives should be.*

### What was, and, is going on?

The quotation below clearly shows us what was very often carried out in listening classrooms.

*'It has been a longstanding tendency of language teaching ... to do nothing more than have students listen to a recording ... and then to ask questions leading the students to reconstitute or reformulate the content of the recording.'* Urbain 1981:127

The researcher of this article attended a listening course for 3 months just four years ago. What he witnessed was not so significantly different from what is meant in the above quotation. Thus, we leave it to the readers of this article to decide whether the teaching of listening skills has changed a lot practically since then.

What is a fact is that whether it is a tape cassette, a videotape or language software, firstly it is played and then

comprehension exercises are asked about to the students to find out whether they have apprehended or not, and vice versa. This is a series of tests of listening, not teaching of listening skills (Sheerin 1978:126, McDonough 1981:74, Anderson & Lynch 1989:66, 68;). Inevitably, with such a traditional approach, it is unlikely that someone can claim that they are teaching listening-skills to their target learners because it is insufficient only to let learner-listeners tune in first, and then solely ask questions to test whether they have understood or not (Beile 1978:147). Thus we need to be very precise about our teaching approaches and objectives. Let us now, firstly, focus on what our teaching objectives should be, and then we shall look at some issues that we need to consider in order to be able to fulfil these objectives.

### What should our teaching objectives be?

This is the first and vital question we need to ask ourselves before commencing to teach. So what should be our teaching objective(s)? Do we need to teach and guide the learners how to comprehend only the particular listening-segments they view in the classroom? Or do we need to teach, train, and guide them to realise and learn what they need to take into account to better understand not only the materials they listen to in the classroom but also to be able to deal with a wide range of possible listening materials, listening situations, and listening topics? Yes, teaching the learner-listeners how to comprehend the materials they listen to in the classroom is definitely beneficial, and can help them to better comprehend. Only this, however, is not sufficient because (1) listening does not finish in the

classroom, and (2) there are many types of materials and possible listening topics all of which cannot be taught in restricted listening courses. As we cannot teach learners how to deal with every single type of listening segment due to the pressure of time (limited listening-classes), they will not be able to learn how to approach different listening materials (as different materials might need to be handled differently). As a result, tomorrow when they meet different materials and encounter different listening opportunities, maybe they will not be able to use their limited listening knowledge (strategies) to the best effect. Therefore, they need to be taught a wide range of flexible listening strategies which they can make use of, both in the classroom, during self-study, as well as in the 'real world'. This means that, not only should our aim be to teach learners how to apprehend merely the materials they listen to in the classroom, but also this objective should cover teaching and guiding them how to deal with the other possible listening materials and situations they might encounter both during autonomous study and in 'the real world'.

Having elucidated what our teaching objectives should be, we can now turn to some suggestions (issues) which we think to be vitally important, and therefore need to be taken into account in a listening-skills teaching process.

#### **Some issues to be considered**

- a) *We need to know the language learners' learning objectives and teach accordingly*

First of all, since different learning objectives necessitate different teaching approaches we need to know why the learners are learning the target language. If the learners, say, learn English in order to attend courses which are lecture based, then apart from the main listening techniques they can also, for example, be instructed on the importance and value of reading and studying in advance the topics that are going to be taught in the forthcoming classes. Such (already gained sufficient) declarative information (i.e. prior knowledge, background knowledge) can enable them to better comprehend the lectures on such topics in the target language. Even this is valid for L1 listening. Similarly, if the learners, for instance, are attending listening courses to pass a tape-cassette (acoustic channel) based-test, then naturally a teaching and training listening approach which mostly develops the acoustic, not visual, channel, need to be followed. To this end, they can be advised, for instance, to read the particular questions about the test-segment before they are presented with it so that they can narrow down the scope of listening and this might hopefully help them to answer correctly. If the target learners are attending listening-courses as a part of second language learning process, then we need to prepare them in a way so that not only will they be able to understand effectively what they listen to in a classroom environment but also outside of it. In short, according to the learning objectives, the teaching and training approach needs to be adjusted and tailored.

After having found out the target learners' learning objectives, there are two more vital issues need to be considered and determined before conducting a teaching

approach. These are, in order of importance, *the slotting of listening courses into the curriculum*, and *the selection or creation of listening materials* because unless you know the learners' learning objectives, you cannot prepare and design an appropriate curriculum, and also cannot select or create effective listening materials. And also unless you have 'adequate' materials, then you might not be able to teach and prepare effectively. That is why we call them 'two more vital issues. Since these two issues are beyond the scope of this article, they will not be discussed here any further.

b) *We need to consider the target learners' age and level:* We cannot teach to the learners of all age and all levels in the same way because age and level of learners can play a vital role in terms of familiarity with the target language, target culture, and strategies they use. That is a fact that there are big differences between the strategies a young and an adult learner use even when listening in their mother tongue. If this is the case, then one can imagine the gap between the strategies a child and an adult learner apply in the target language. Under normal conditions, the same can be said in terms of familiarity with the target language, target culture and even world knowledge. In terms of strategy use, it is even said (O'Malley et al 1985a.40) that *translation*, which is an ineffective strategy, is over-used mostly by elementary (and ineffective) learners. All these simple and clear examples indicate that language teachers need to consider the age and level of their target learners while trying to teach them effectively.

c) *We need to be aware of the fact that learners already possess available L1 skills:*

Another point that listening-teachers should not forget is that language learners already possess available L1 skills. In other words, they have similar strategies to native speakers of the target language (Kellerman 1992:251, Conrad 1985:67) such as *prediction, elaboration, forming hypothesis, inferencing, contextualisation, and the others*. All of these are effective strategies for L2 listening (O'Malley et al 1989:431-2, Bacon 1992:408-9,) as well. Therefore, teachers should not, and ought not to, consider them as knowing nothing about language learning strategies. On contrary, what we need to do is to (1) let them know that they already have effective strategies and use them in understanding a topic in their mother tongue, and (2) encourage them to make use of such strategies in comprehending the target language both (and firstly) in the classroom as well as outside of it. This can be done through requesting or giving tasks that necessitate the use of such strategies.

d) *We need to let learners know that they cannot approach every single material in the same way:*

Learners should be taught that all types of listening materials should not be approached similarly, because such an approach can make them less successful. Conversely, different types of listening texts such as audio-visual and audio-lingual texts, different topics such as the ones learners are familiar with and the others they are not, necessitate separate approaches. Audio-lingual materials, for instance, do not require the use of visual clues, as they

do not feature such aspects, while visual materials do. Similarly the easy topics do not require the use of the same strategies which the difficult ones necessitate (Bacon 1992:407-8).

e) *We need to draw the learners' attention to the role of unfamiliar items in comprehending:*

Learners should be made aware of the role of unfamiliar items in listening comprehension. These can be lexical or syntactical (Conrad 1989:14, O'Malley et al 1989:428), and they can cause confusion (Rivers 1981:164). Thus, learners should be taught to recognise the need of over-learning most of unfamiliar vocabulary and the other items they encounter so that when they tune in to a listening text, from this prior over-learning as well as the items' prior context they can be sure that they have identified them (Eastman 1991:183-4; Terrel 1977). Furthermore, Eastwood (1993:496) says:

'It is also probable that syntactic and semantic elements provide all of the learner-listener's clues to comprehension, as other elements available to the native speaker are not available to him.'

Unfamiliar items, which are one of the main factors that make it difficult to comprehend a listening text (Boyle 1984:35; Anderson & Lynch 1989:5-6, 56; O'Malley et al 1989:428; Underwood 1993:17) can hinder comprehension and de-motivate language learning. Therefore, if we can attract the learners' attention to the unfamiliar items, and also if they over-learn them when they are encountered, this can help to a greater extent in all listening situations.

f) *We need to attract the learners' attention to the role of all available comprehending clues.*

The ranges of comprehending clues are manifold. They can be all kind of visuals (i.e. still/motion pictures, images, graphics, videos, imaginary drawings, schematic drawings, animations, and photographs), titles, facial expressions and body language, situational context, contextual references, grammatical rules, and others. All these can be very beneficial in terms of helping comprehension (Casembre 1962:51-55, Dooling & Lachman 1971:216-222, Omagiga 1979:112-15, Arnold & Brooks 1976:713-16, Anderson & Lynch 1989:48, Mueller 1980:335-40, Secules et al 1992:480) providing that learners are made aware of the importance of them, and use them to their advantage. Also, regarding the importance of visuals (here attitudes) Brown (1978:59) says:

'... The student should observe and predict the attitudes and intentions of the speaker as well as the verbal content of the text.'

If we need to give another example, we can say that in many cases *titles* which are informative (Dooling & Lachman 1971: 216-222, Anderson & Lynch 1989:48) can be very beneficial because they can narrow the scope of a listening text and give enough information about what the learners are going to hear. All these show that we need to, and have to, draw the learners' attention to such valuable clues which help, not hinder comprehension. This can be managed through instruction or giving tasks which require the use of them. For once the learners become aware of the role of such valuable comprehension clues in listening and use them to their advantage in the classroom, they will use

them not only during autonomous-learning but also in real-life situations. In fact, as mentioned above this is what we need to target in 'a general-listening-skills-teaching process'.

*g) The learners need to be reminded that 'full attention' is a must:*

Lack or presence of attention is also an important issue in L2 listening training and comprehension (Oxford 1993:208). It is a de facto that we need to listen carefully in order for us to be able to apprehend what we tune in. This principle is also valid for L1 listening as well as for all learning-cases. To this end, firstly learners can be instructed in the importance of listening attentively. Secondly, when teaching is conducted their attention can be attracted to some aspects of language such as pronunciation (stress and intonation), comprehension clues, discourse (linguistic) markers such as micro- and macro- markers, grammatical structures and so forth that can help them to realise the essentialness of paying careful attention, because on many occasions merely owing to not listening appropriately, we misunderstand.

*h) We need to draw their attention to the differences between spoken and written languages:*

Learners' attention should also be attracted to the differences between the spoken and written English because there are very distinguishing differences between these two forms of language, such as sounds, stress and intonation. Eastman (1991:184) goes even further and says:  
'... English is effectively two languages, one written and one

spoken...'

While some of these differences such as stress and intonation make it harder for learners to follow and comprehend a spoken text (as they add new features to already available elements); the others such as pauses and fillers, (spoken-language) syntax and vocabulary make it easier. Additionally, and maybe more importantly, we need to attract their attention to the differences between informal and formal spoken language in the organisation of speech, syntax and vocabulary, pauses and fillers and so on (Underwood 1993:9-15, Brown & Yule 1992, Carter, R. & M. McCarthy 1997, Brow 1986). For instance, news programmes, which are mainly written in advance and read out, are formal aural-language and do not feature any pauses and filter; while simultaneous spoken language does. If we need to give another crystal clear example, we can say that in informal-spoken language contractions (short forms) such as *isn't, it's, aren't, why not, and so on* are preferred while in formal-spoken language 'long forms' such as *is not, it is, are not, why can't and so fort*. In short, drawing the learners' attention to the features of formal-spoken language, informal-spoken language and, written language can help significantly. Therefore, this is another point language teachers need to consider while trying to teach, guide and train language learners in how to deal with listening materials and situations.

*i) We need to teach and focus on effective strategies:*

A teaching method should be adequate because inadequate

learning can cause students to adopt ineffective strategies (Eastman 1991:182-3). In order to train adequately, we can tell learners what effective listeners (O'Malley et al. 1985:557-8, Eastman 1991:185) as well as ineffective ones do, and then we can encourage them to apply effective strategies, which are used by 'good learners'. The effective strategies are: *Elaboration: World knowledge (relating what we hear to our world knowledge)*, *Elaboration: Personal knowledge (relating what we hear to our personal knowledge)*, *inferencing, contextualisation*, *Elaboration: Self-questioning*, *Prediction*, *Inferencing*, *Contextualisation*, *Deduction*, *Guessing*, (O'Malley et al. 1985a:38-9, O'Malley et al. 1989:431-2, Bacon 1992:407-8)

j) *We should let learners become aware of ineffective strategies as well, and encourage them not to use them:*

Fortunately, ineffective strategies have been revealed. They are *a key word, translation, representation*, and they do not help comprehending and acquisition (O'Malley et al. 1985a:39). Eastman (1987:198) says:

'The most common strategy that learners adopt is that of word-by-word translation. In ~~the~~ early stages, this is frequently successful because words are often monosyllabic; sentences are short, syntactically similar to the listener's mother-tongue and often presented in isolation. The learner has time to store, mentally recycle the phrase and translate it before the next phrase is presented. ... However, as soon as these ... easily translatable structures ... are left behind, the strategy fails. ... The listener tries harder to follow his translating strategy, repeatedly discovers that it does not work, and panics, especially where the appropriate grammatical and lexical knowledge has not been previously absorbed.'

Such a problem can be overcome through instructing and training the uncomprehending listeners so that they can relinquish their unsuccessful listening strategies. To this end, Eastman (1987:198) states:

'... we can first give him training in listening for stressed words ... and then present him with aural materials which force him to postpone translation.'

What here falls to us is (1) to instruct the learners about the effective and ineffective strategies, (2) to show clear differences between the two by, if necessary, referring to L1 listening as well, and (3) to provide texts and give tasks which require the use of effective strategies.

k) *Pedagogical and psychological aspects of teaching should also be taken account of:*

We need to follow a gradual teaching approach. This can be done by firstly focussing on the basic and easy aspects of the listening texts such as the speakers, visual clues, the main idea of the topic (general topic), context words. When these aspects are comprehended, the other elements can be better understood. To this end, Brown (1978:57) says:

'The better you know the speaker and the better acquainted you are with the topic, the better you can predict what he will say next - and you can start preparing your own reply.'

Progressively the other main features such as details, deeper meanings of the text, and parsing function words can be taught slowly. Regarding main aspects, Eastwood (1993:496) says:

It is probable that semantic context will give far greater guidance to the learner-listener. In other words, recognising content words will be the first step the learner makes in comprehension; parsing function words is a skill which emerges much later. This is at least my experience in elementary classes.'

Also psychologically learners need to be encouraged by giving them simple tasks at the beginning stages, providing enough pre-listening support, playing tape cassettes and video-tapes several times. Even when we want to correct their mistakes, we need to be very careful, gentle, and sensitive. All these can avoid anxiety or fear of failure in the learners. To this end, Eastman (1991:183) says

'... it is necessary for the teacher to play tapes several times but still maintain an unconcerned attitude to a learner's non-comprehension, partly because he cannot force comprehension on a learner and partly to obviate the growth of anxiety or a fear of failure in the learner.'

In short, as a Kurdish proverb says:

'Plough neatly, deeply but do not hurt the oxen'

*1) More time for practice and less time for instruction:*

It should not be forgotten that, like in many teaching and learning situations, practice is a key factor in teaching, training, and acquiring listening-skills as well. That is why priority should be given to practice in the classroom, but, of course, instruction also has its own role as 'O'Malley et al. (1985b: 577) state:

'... Classroom instruction on learning strategies with integrative language skills can facilitate learning.'

What we need to be aware of about instruction, however,

is that only instructing on how to listen and comprehend simply does not always work, and does not help all learners particularly the 'poor' ones (Eastman 1987:197). In other words, it is less beneficial and effective than practising. Maybe it is because of this that a Chinese thinker says:

'I hear, forget; see, remember; do, learn'

Therefore the most of class-time should be given to activity as Eastman (1991:185) also says:

'If practice is the key to learning to listen and comprehend, the teacher ... should devote considerable class time to activity.'

On the other hand, O'Malley et al. (1985a: 44) say:

'If learning strategies practised in the classroom could be applied successfully in an acquisition environment outside the classroom, the potential usefulness of learning strategies is considerably greater.'

Although these two quotations look to be contradictory, they bring up an important issue, which is 'how much practice' The data of a research (ibid) shows two main reasons why classroom might not be contributing to higher level language tasks, which is entirely consistent with Eastman's ideas above. These are (1) the infrequent occurrence of tasks, and (2) the infrequent use of strategies for learning tasks in the classroom. This clearly indicates the value of practising strategies in the classroom, which can help apply them outside the classroom. It also indicates that enough priority is not given to practice in the classroom. Maybe the reasons for the method of '*total physical*

*response*' developing listening comprehension (Thiele & Scheibner-Herzig 1983:281-5) lie in the fact that it gives learners tasks and then provides opportunity of practice, which Eastman, and O'Malley et al., to my full understanding, want to emphasise in the extracts above.

Regarding the importance of 'practice' there is another point we need to bear in mind. It is that 'instructing' does not avoid panic, while practice can do as Eastman (1987:197) states:

'The learner is usually straining every nerve to listen for meaning; many do panic when they miss a piece of language, and panic is not controllable by instruction.'

So it appears that, like many teaching situations, practice takes an important place in teaching listening skills and training and guiding language-learners. Thus, priority should be given to practice in the classroom so that they can acquire effective strategies which might result in being used both during self-study and in the real world.

*m) We need to help learners to find out why they have difficulties with some parts if they do:*

This can be done in different ways: First of all, if we realise some particular reasons of difficulties which might stem from our particular learners or materials while teaching, then we can focus on such difficulties, discuss with learners and explain them. Alternatively, the learners can be requested to listen with sub-titles and find out the parts they had difficulty with and why. Here there is a point we need to emphasise. Sub-titles and / or transcripts should not be preferred at

initial listening because, as Eastman (1988, 1991:182, Lund 1991:202, Peter 1994:90) states, reading while listening means that learner-listeners will not learn to rely completely on the ear as the visual sense is more improved than the auditory. In other words, most of the learners in general are visual as (Dun & Dun 1979, Joy 1987:96-7), and therefore if they read while tuning in they can be lulled into believing that they apprehended the listening text, which is a liability from the point of view of teaching and acquiring listening comprehension (Eastman 1988, 1991:182) because it causes listeners to adopt on-line translation (*ibid.*), which is an ineffective listening strategy (*ibid.*, O'Malley et al. 1985a: 39). It is also said:

'Aural reading' transfers negatively to listening comprehension because it ignores the crucial differences in sensory mode and relies on word-by-word encoding, which is not the appropriate level for comprehension.' Eastman (1991:183)

So, we need to suggest the learners try to understand listening texts fully without the use of sub-titles initially. However, they definitely need to be recommended to listen with sub-titles at *post-listening stage*, because of the advantages of sub-titles (see Cody 1962:76, Porter & Roberts 1981:47, Vanderplank 1988a:272-81). Even if they are easy and familiar, it is still to the learners' advantage to listen with sub-titles or transcripts at this stage because this enables them to acquire correct stress and intonation, pronunciation, learn new words, correct spelling, proper names, and to find out why they had difficulties with some parts.



*n) We need to be realistic:*

We should not anticipate that learners will comprehend one hundred percent, which is unrealistic, even in L1 listening-situations, and a word-by-word decoding. On the contrary, they should be encouraged to target a reasonable, logical and acceptable translation rather than 'a slavish transliteration of the text' (Eastman 1991:185). Also, Brown (1978:59) says:

'The student - and the teacher have to be prepared to operate with a notion of 'reasonable interpretation' rather than of 'correct interpretation. The important point is that the text should mean something to the student.'

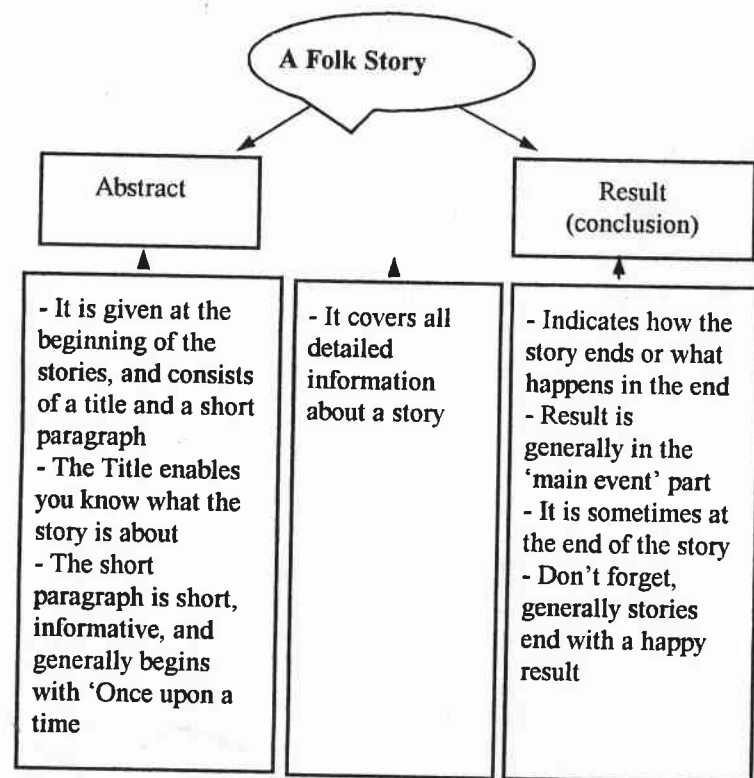
*o) Learners' attention need to be drawn to the role of 'correct' pronunciation:*

Teaching and learning of 'correct' pronunciation, stress and intonation is also an important aspect in listening-skills training as it plays a considerable role in comprehending. Very often we, non-native speakers, mis-comprehend a listening text because of knowing the wrong pronunciation of a word. In other words, as we do not know the correct pronunciation of some words, this disables us to apprehend them although we know the meaning of these words like the back of our hands. Similarly we have the same difficulty when we respond or speak as a result of not pronouncing correctly, which results in not being understood. To overcome this difficulty, Eastman (1993:500-1) says that teachers must ensure that non-native listeners learn to pronounce content words, and equally teach them to pronounce function words without stress as it is important

to distinguish content and function in listening comprehension. The problem, however, is how many non-native and even native teachers can manage this although we agree with the role and value of correct pronunciation, stress and intonation in listening skills. To be honest, the author of this article is unable to teach such aspects, and he also believes that, frankly, many non-native teachers as well as even some native ones do not know this aspect of English language well enough to teach it (as English has many different stress and intonation functions). Maybe this aspect, alternatively, can be taught well by educated and trained phonetic teachers rather than 'general'-English teachers or listening-teachers. An alternative way of overcoming such a problem, however, maybe is to strongly suggest learners listen with sub-titles 'on purpose' and try to focus on the difficulties they have and improve their weaknesses.

*p) Learners' attention needs to be drawn to the importance of the familiarity with the structures of different types of listening texts in the target language.*

Let us say that we want to expose 'a folk story' to our learners in the classroom. Not only to prepare them to listen to the story effectively in the classroom, but also to prepare them for all similar stories they might hear in the real world, they can be instructed as following:



We believe that such information can provide enough foreground information for the learners about the structure of stories. It can be given aurally or through pre-listening tasks. If we need to give another instance, let us say that they are going to watch a news programme in the target language for the first time. Similarly they can be instructed on the structure of a news programme in the target language such as, say, indicating that headlines are presented firstly and then detailed news. And then the material can be exposed. This can be vitally important in particular when the structure of a news programme is

different than in their first language. All these can enable the learners to be familiar with the target language materials, which means when they encounter them in the real word (tomorrow) they can hopefully know how to deal with them.

### Conclusion

In this article we tried to draw attention to *only some* issues, which are vital but not necessarily complete, in teaching listening skills to language learners. It has become clear that in training and guiding learners in the acquisition and use of listening skills in the classroom, during self-study and in the real-environment; the role of teachers is vitally important and therefore a great deal of responsibility falls to them. In other words, there are plenty of issues we teachers need to consider while trying to teach and guide. This requires us firstly to learn and know, and secondly to apply what we know. That is why a few times, we said 'the learners should *be made aware of...*' To this end Kellerman (1992:253) says;

"A better informed and more aware teacher can only become a better teacher."

Regarding teaching and guiding effectively, it is also worth mentioning one thing more. It is that if we want to teach better and effectively, then, for example, we can conduct a post-teaching-evaluative-analysis questionnaire at regular intervals to tease out what aspects of our teaching-approaches are found beneficial and effective, and vice-versa. This hopefully can shed some invaluable light on what we are carrying out in teaching listening skills in the classrooms. In particular, when we are aware of the results

of new experiments as well as developments in the field of teaching listening skills, then the contribution of such analysis will be greater as it enables us to compare the findings with the other findings in similar situations which can help us to arrive at more objective results.

Apart from the teachers, the size of the classes and the facilities the teachers are provided with are other necessary aspects that can deeply affect the teaching of listening skills. Of course, a language teacher who is teaching a group of 50 students in a class with inappropriate facilities cannot be anticipated to teach as effectively as another teacher who is teaching a group of 15-20 pupils in a class with the most up-to-date facilities. Not only such an expectation is unfair, but also it is illogical and unreasonable.

Lastly, it should be added that the better the learners are taught in the classroom, the more successful they can be both during autonomous study as well as in the outside world. In other words, if learners learn how to apply different strategies to apprehend separate types of texts in the classrooms, than they will be able, to a greater extent, to use such strategies effectively both during self-study as well as in the real-world. Otherwise, to put it strongly, it would be unfair to anticipate novices to comprehend and acquire effectively both in the classroom and outside of it.

Since this article is regarding the *teaching* of listening skills, we want to conclude it with a famous Kurdish scholar's poem. In his book entitled 'The Prophet', Kahlil Gibran has a poem on the teacher, the part of which runs

thus:

'Then said the teacher: 'Speak to us of teaching.' ... 'If he is indeed wise, he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of of your own mind.'

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