

Assessment Practices and Students' Creativity

Practici de evaluare și creativitate studențească

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Abstract

It is my belief that assessment practices in the classroom can be used to protect students' creativity by recognizing and appreciating creative expression. This doesn't mean that teachers should throw out standards or provide empty praise for inappropriate ideas. If responses are not appropriate, teachers should provide suggestions on how students might adapt the idea so that it is useful while still preserving the novelty. For students to be willing to express their creativity, they must feel that their ideas, especially those that are unconventional, are welcome in the classroom. Students can be taught how and when to express novel ideas so that they are appropriate and useful within a given context. By recognizing novelty and helping students calibrate that novelty so that it is appropriate and useful, teachers can go a long way in supporting and promoting student creativity.

Rezumat

Metodele de evaluare a studenților pot fi folosite pentru a le proteja creativitatea prin recunoașterea și aprecierea expresiei creative. Asta nu înseamnă că profesorii trebuie să neglijeze standardele de evaluare sau să laude idei nepotrivite. Dacă răspunsurile nu sunt adecvate, profesorii ar trebui să ofere soluții privind modul în care studenții pot adapta ideea astfel încât să devină folositoare dar să-și păstreze și aspectul de noutate. Dar, pentru ca studenții să fie dispuși să-și exprime creativitatea trebuie să simtă că ideile lor, în special cele ieșite din convențional, sunt binevenite. Studenții pot fi învățați când și cum să-și exprime ideile astfel încât să fie potrivite și folositoare contextului care le-a generat. Recunoscând noutatea și originalitatea, și ajutând studenții să-și calibreze spiritul inovator, profesorii pot sprijini și dezvolta creativitatea studenților.

Key words: *assessment, creative expression, novelty, listening skills*

Cuvinte cheie: *evaluare, expresie creativă, noutate, deprinderi de ascultare*

The topic of this paper was triggered by my first experience with the Iatefl conference when in 2007 I arrived in Aberdeen, and trying to check at the hotel, I was faced with the problem of understanding what was said to me in English, or what seemed like English.

No, the reason why I did not understand was not because of the beautiful Scottish accent, for which I came prepared, but the English spoken by an Indian native speaker, for which I was not prepared. It was difficult to understand because I have never heard it before and I could not distinguish the words. The problem was solved by having him pronounce each word separately.

Another issue regarding difficulties in understanding that I came across is related to my teaching a course in conference interpreting when my students, at advanced level, were not able to translate into Romanian what they were hearing, but having no problem when the text was in front of their eyes.

I could not help wondering why listening is such a problem and one of the possible answers to my question is that listening is a skill area that is often tested but rarely taught. Listening is perhaps the most critical element in language teaching and language learning. It is the key to speaking, and beyond that, reading and writing. Yet listening remains one of the least understood

processes in language learning. Teaching listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any ESL teacher. This is because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. It is frustrating for students because there are no rules as in grammar teaching. Listening, in general, means listening and understanding what we hear at the same time. There are two concurrent actions that are demanded to take place in this process.

In order to better understand the process of listening we need to be aware of what listening consists of, what are the processes involved in the process of listening. The most important are: discriminating between sounds (different accents or pronunciations), recognizing words, identifying grammatical groupings of words, identifying expressions and sets of utterances to create meaning, using background knowledge to recall important words and ideas. To make the most of our listening abilities we need make a conscious effort not to “switch off”, or become distracted while listening.

There is a traditional labeling for listening as a “passive” skill. But I believe that a listener is involved in guessing, anticipating, checking, interpreting, interacting and organizing by associating their prior knowledge of meaning and form. Listening is tiring and that is why in conference interpreting the interpreter can work for only 20-30 minutes before taking a break.

But why do students have such difficulty in listening? The answer is that while studying English, listening is taught for the purpose of getting the right answer. Over many years I have prepared my students by thoroughly pre-teaching all possible unknown words. I have also checked that they understood the context of the listening and then made sure that they had predicted the possible answers to all the questions.

Results were generally good, so what is wrong with this? Unfortunately there is a difference between classroom listening and real-life listening. The problems begin the moment the students step outside the classroom into the real world. They are surrounded by a vast range of spontaneous and unpredictable language. They have no control over the range of vocabulary they may encounter or the kind of things they will hear or need to respond to. This is why many times even higher level students who do very well in the classroom find it so difficult to cope when faced with a *real* situation. We simply haven't taught them in a way that will help them cope with this.

In researching information for this paper, I naturally consulted my current advanced classes. I believe that by listening carefully to our students and involving them at a personal level, we can develop the insight necessary to help them improve their listening skills.

The majority of the comments made by my students were related to the stream of **speech (connected speech)** and how **'fast'** native speakers speak. One problem that students have is distinguishing individual sounds and word boundaries in the stream of speech. They expressed difficulties in not catching the phoneme at the end of a word when this sound is important for understanding meaning as in *She's read a lot* and *She read a lot*. Another example would be hearing the wrong word for phonetic transfer reasons such as hearing *keys* for *kiss* or *being* for *been*.

The natural features of connected speech are linguistic features such as: *elision*, (a feature of connected speech by which a consonant sound is left out in order to facilitate articulation e.g. the disappearance of 't' in 'last chance', or *went round to* becomes /wen raun tu/; *assimilation* (what happens when nearby sounds influence each other causing them to sound more similar e.g. the 'd' to 'b' assimilation in 'good morning'); and the overall phenomenon of *weak forms* in spoken English can cause a great deal of comprehension problems, even for advanced learners, if they are not exposed to them regularly through receptive and productive activities.

Another issue related to difficulties in developing students' listening skills is how to perceive meaning expressed through stress and intonation. Meaning is often expressed through stress and intonation in English. For example, in the sentence *I can't see you tomorrow* the meaning is different depending on whether the stress is on *I* (= I can't see you, but someone else can), on *tomorrow* (= but I can see you another day) or on *can't* (= so forget about it).

Another example is related to how pitch can convey meaning and emotion and how groups of words can convey different meanings regardless of syntax. *Alfred, said the boss, is stupid*. This

is contrasted with **Alfred said the boss is stupid**. If this type of feature does not exist in the student's own language, it may not be picked up and the speaker's meaning misunderstood.

My research has lead me to believe that problems related to understanding meaning do not involve necessarily the making out the sounds but once the student is able to distinguish them then, sometimes it becomes a problem of understanding vocabulary: unknown words and structures. If the brain meets an unfamiliar word, it is going to need to devote more time and energy to processing that word than if it is familiar. The time and energy devoted to doing so is inevitably taken away from processing the continuing text.

The listener may therefore lose the thread of the text, at least momentarily. This may be non-conscious, or in some cases, the listeners may find themselves consciously thinking "What was that word?" rather than going on listening. Or sometimes students don't recognize expressions and words because of modifications undergone in the stream of speech such as assimilation, elision and weak vowel sounds. It's sometimes possible to understand every word in a text but still fail to understand the meaning, as in the case of idioms: e.g. **drive a hard bargain**, **fly off the handle**, or an example from my first year students: **the apple of one's eye** translated as the **apple in front of his eyes**.

When it comes to understanding the sounds of the English language students are faced yet with another challenge: understanding different accents. It makes it even more difficult to know or recognize the vocabulary used by the speaker. Listeners are not expecting words to be pronounced in the way they actually are, this also adds to the processing load.

They may know how the word is pronounced in one accent, but not recognize it when pronounced with a different accent. Becoming used to teacher-talk, or English spoken too clearly in class, and becoming overly accustomed to the teacher's accent have to be mentioned as potentially problematic when later confronted with trying to understand other native speakers and accents: especially in the case of conference interpreting the demanding processes of listening, fatigue can affect the ability to concentrate and encode long or continued extracts of speech.

When it comes to enhancing out students listening skills, the truth is we don't improve our students' ability by testing it, we only ascertain their level of development. Unfortunately listening tests typically resemble reading comprehension tests except that the student listens to a passage instead of reading it. The student then answers multiple-choice questions that address various levels comprehension.

One way of helping students is to develop the process of deducing the meaning of words. This is a process we also need to develop in our students. Language is a constantly developing form and when we listen in our native language we still hear words that are new to us or that we may not fully understand. This doesn't however lead us to check lists of unknown words in dictionaries or learn word lists before we listen. By constantly pre-teaching and preparing students we are undermining the development of this process. Students need to be challenged and to struggle to find meaning for themselves.

In order to eliminate or avoid some of those problems or limitations teachers should first of all find out which are individual difficulties and disadvantages in dealing with a listening text. Each students has a different type of pronunciation and accordingly different types of listening because they **associate the way they pronounce with what they listen**. Departing from students' difficulties teachers should judge their level, then figure out when and how to include certain texts with a high degree of difficulty, with variation of accents, and the kind of exercises for each occasion. We want out students to hear listening material in a number of different genres.

One way of making assessment more interesting and efficient is to design 'real' tasks that resemble as much as possible the original purpose for which the text was intended. The result is that students' listening skills are developed and not simply tested, which is what often happens. For example: If we listen to a train announcement we do so in order to make sure we know the time of the train we want to catch; if we listen to someone giving directions we do so in order to be able to find a destination. The main stages in developing and improving students listening skills are the

following: provide a purpose for listening, encourage risk taking, build students' self confidence, and improve students' creativity

This research article is designed to help other teachers of English in finding opportunities during their lessons to build on the existing listening skills of their students. The table below is an attempt to provide a few examples of listening activities.

Listening activity	Purpose	Suggested task
Lectures, speeches, monologues	Gather information	Take notes and produce an essay or summary
Plane or train announcements	Check time and place of departure	Find correct place on airport map, or correct platform
News and other radio genres, advertisements	To be informed about current affairs. To be exposed to different accents	Express opinions on what you have heard and continue building on the information or report events.
Directions	To find a destination. To visualize information	Draw or follow a map How to get to a building, to a park
Fictional stories	Develop creativity	Find solutions to problems; verify the results of the problems solved. Re-write the end. Role playing. Writing dialogues.
Poetry	Develop creativity	Write new lines. Rephrase stanzas. Association of sounds to emotions and colors.
Music and sound effects	Develop creativity	Write down the lyrics
Play a movie with the sound off	Develop Creativity, guessing, anticipating, interpreting	Role playing.

Some teachers think that video is less useful for teaching listening than audio because having both visual and audio make students pay less attention to what they are actually hearing. A danger of video is that students may treat it rather as they treat watching television –i.e. uncritically and lazily.

In conclusion, I would like to underline that the key to helping students improve their listening skills is to convince them that not understanding everything is OK. This is more of an attitude adjustment than anything else, and it is easier for some students to accept than others. It is important to encourage students to know their mistakes and work on them; prompt them to identify their errors and make a list of their most common ones.

Another important point that I try to teach my students (with differing amounts of success) is that they need to listen to English as often as possible, but for **short periods of time**. An important piece of advice that I give them is to watch a film with subtitles. As they hear the English dialogue, the subtitles will help them understand; as they understand, they will, to some extent, absorb the language they hear. Even if they don't understand anything, five to ten minutes is a minor investment. However, for this strategy to work, students must not expect improved understanding too quickly. The brain is capable of amazing things if given time; students must have the patience to wait for results.

I would like to end by pointing out that **listening is not a passive act**. It is a demanding process, which involves understanding different accents, pronunciation and intonation. It has semantic implications both lexical and grammatical. And it activates background knowledge and forces us to make educated assumptions.

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