

Listening skills in a multicultural classroom



One-way listening practice in a 1st grade at an international school in China.

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Introduction

I live in China, and I had the opportunity to teach two lessons in a 1st grade at an international school. This class consist of students with many different mother tongues, and they are either in China as expats or one or both of their parents are from another country but has chosen to live their life in Shanghai. In other words, a multicultural classroom.

I got interested in the teaching of listening when I read the chapter about listening in P. Gibbons book; Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning and decided to focus on this for my research. All the aspects of listening are important for language development, but I decided to focus on one-way listening activities to tune the students' listening skills and try to show the students the importance of being able to listen for information.

My research question is as follows:

How can I plan and implement a teaching sequence focusing on teaching listening, taking into account a multicultural classroom?

Relevance

Competences within listening are just as important for language development as reading, writing, and speaking. Another important point about learning to listen is that it also will assist when developing other skills. One of the main focuses for English in Fælles Mål 2019 is to develop linguistic competences so that the students will be able to communicate and use English nationally and globally now and in future life. Effective communication with others also depends on how well the students are able to understand what is being said. Developing listening skills can be a challenging task for teachers, but focused listening activities every now and then will add to successful listening development over time. (Gibbons, 2015, p.183)

It is relevant for me as a future teacher to practice how to plan and implement a teaching sequence that can support the student's linguistic development. It gives me a chance to put some theories, strategies and methods to use, reflect on my own practice and develop into a competent teacher.

Method

I planned a two-lesson course in a 1st grade in an international school in China, the lesson plan is attached as appendix 1.

I really liked the activities explained by Gibbons in her chapter about listening and decided to use some of them in my lesson. Some of them with a focus on listening for information about time, since that was a topic, the students just had been working on. Gibbons' states that *comprehensible teacher talk is largely to do with what the students already know about the topic* (Gibbons, 2015, p.43), so it made sense to stay on the same topic when planning my activities.

I have some teaching experience and have come to learn that it is a good idea to incorporate some brain breaks between activities, so I came up with some brain break activities that server the purpose of being fun and active for the students, at the same time as being focused on listening.

I used a participating observation technic as I had to observe at the same time I was teaching. It was also unsystematic as I just tried to absorb as much as possible from my lessons. (Gjørund, 2000, p.36) I found it difficult to observe everything that was going on in the classroom at the same time as I was teaching. I have shared my general observations and feelings of what happened in the classroom during my lessons in appendix 2.

Theory

Listening is about comprehension, but more importantly a route to language development.

Understanding what is said in a particular situation provides important models for subsequent

language learning. Listening is therefore a skill that needs to be practiced. (Gibbons, 2015, p.182-183)

According to Nunan there are four **contexts for listening**. One-way listening and especially listening to information-based topics are the most difficult, because the listeners don't have the opportunity to ask for clarification or slow down the information flow. (Gibbons, 2015, p.186-187)

ZPD or Zone of Proximal Development is defined as the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with guidance. By providing comprehensible input through optimal challenges and scaffolding the teacher can help the students build upon their existing knowledge and skills. (Gibbons, 2015, p.13-15+24-25)

Message abundance is a scaffolding strategy that is crucial for young learners to effectively obtain the information that is given. Rephrasing and repeating words and sentences and using gestures and pictures for the same information gives the students a better chance to understand what the teacher is trying to teach. (Gibbons, 2015, p. 42-46)

Analysis

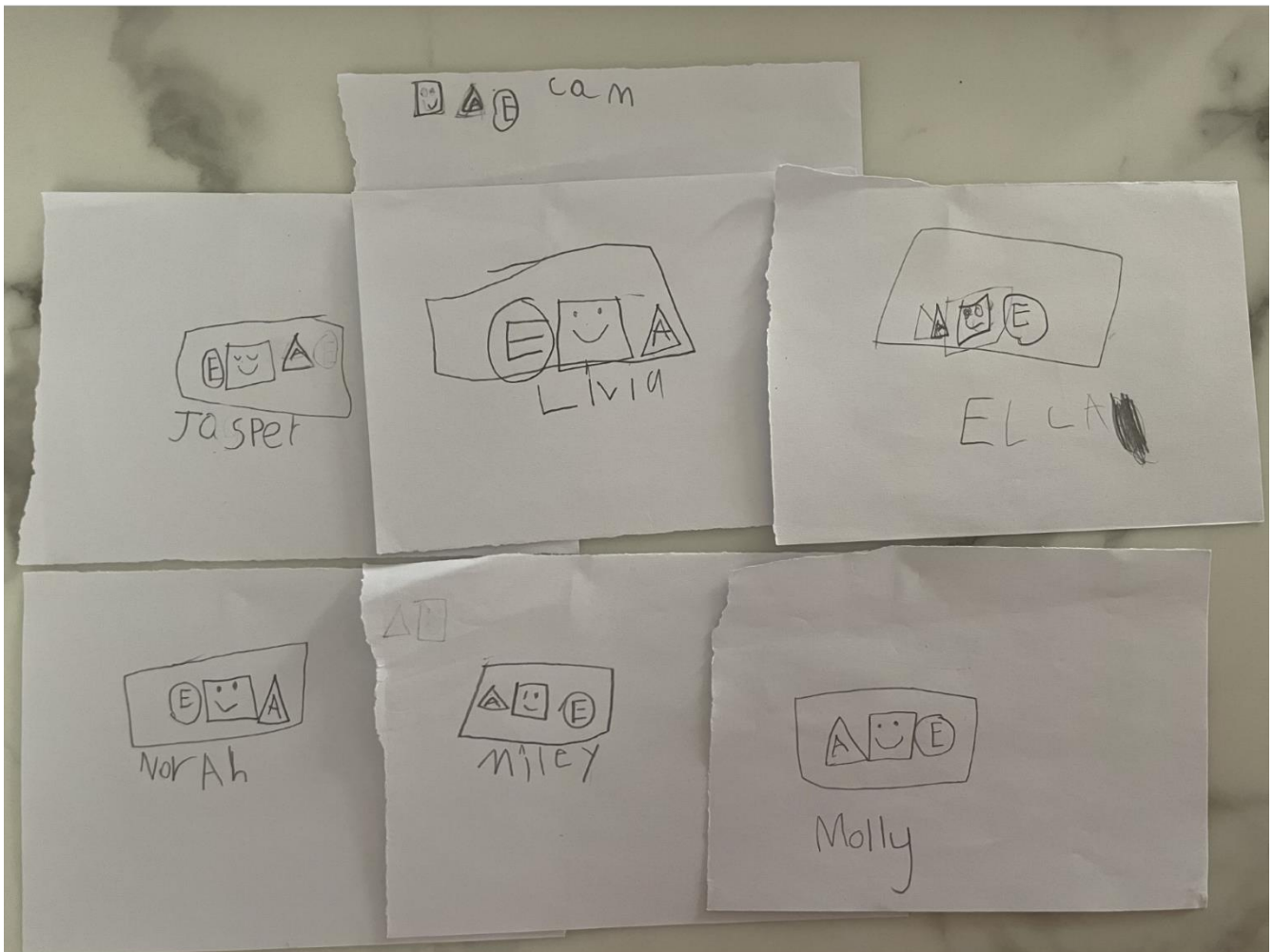
I used many different activities where one-way listening was in focus to keep the lessons fun and engaging for the students. Small active brain breaks incorporated into the lesson plans provided both me and the students with a quick breathing break to keep the spirit high.

With this lesson course I gave the students a chance to practice comprehending while listening and I got a chance to see their current ability to comprehend and follow directions and instructions.

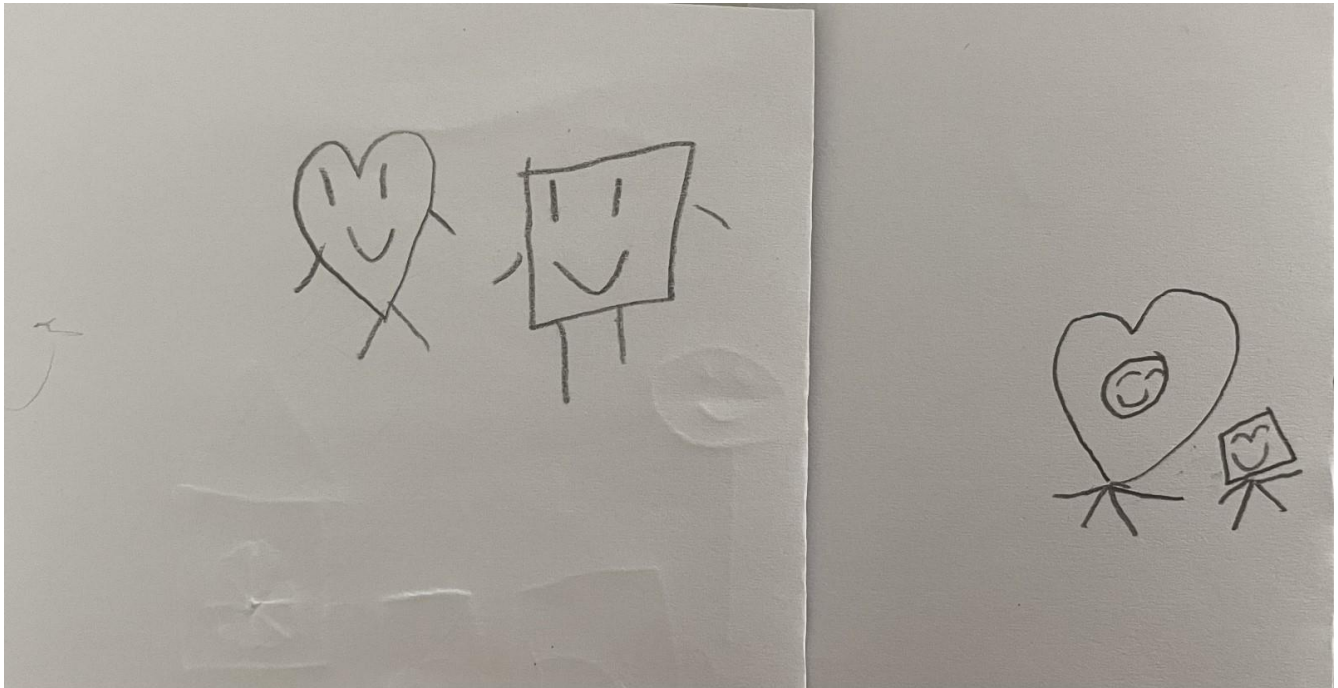
The students are used to listen to English as all their classes more or less are in English, but at the same time they are also used to be able to ask for clarification and the students that are less skilled in English ask for translation from more skilled students in their mother tongue. Because of that the

activities on this course were a bit more challenging for most of the students, since I made a big deal out of trying not give them anything “useful” when answering their questions and gently stopped them when they were tempted to translate into their mother tongue for their friends. In these cases, I made sure to give extra explanations and support to the struggling students.

This picture shows some of the answers from my starting activity and I think they generally did a great job.



This picture is an example from my finishing activity where a girl made the drawing on the left and explained it to a friend who drew the picture on the right.



Through the course of these two lessons the students generally got more and more comfortable listening and it seemed to me that they trusted their own ability to understand and act accordingly better.

I can't tell for sure if the students listening skills have improved during this short lesson course, but based on theory we know that listening is a skill that needs to be practiced and that is what we have done.

I used videos and audios with different English dialects, and it didn't seem to affect the student's ability to understand more than an ordinary English accent. I even used a heavy Indian dialect that I found a bit challenging myself, but the students didn't seem to have additional problems understanding and when I asked, they only mentioned that the speed of the audio was challenging.

The students had different levels of understanding or ZPD which the different activities were meant to take into account. From 'brain break' activities where the students don't really realize that they are learning something, to listening activities varying in topic and instructional level.

Each activity was supported with message abundance, in terms of gestures, modeling, physical materials, rephrasing, supportive writing and drawings, etc.

Reflection

I have found that message abundance is necessary when teaching a multicultural classroom and that it is a good idea to have had some thoughts about different strategies before starting the lessons. At least until I get more experience and it comes more naturally.

It was challenging at times but at the same time effective because both the students and I could not use our mother tongue when communication and understanding got a bit difficult. We had to make our communication work and therefore we were all very patient with each other.

Focused teaching on listening definitely shouldn't be neglected, and it can be made both fun and engaging for students. I enjoyed the listening activities and got inspired to do more activities for another time.

Practicing listening will improve language learning overall, I believe that it includes the fact that listening practice will result in a reduction in the overall instruction time in a classroom and leave more time for activities and immersion over time.

I managed to get through all the activities I planned, but the end activities for each lesson was cut a bit short because of time limitations. For next time I will be less ambitious when planning my lessons and make more space to immersion or discussion and just have a related and teachable game ready in case of extra time.

Conclusion

References

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Appendix 1

Lesson plan

Lesson: English	Class: 1 st grade international school	Title of lesson: One-way listening	Duration: two lessons
Lessons' aims: To expose the students to a number of different listening situations through activities. For the students to practice their skills in listening and comprehending information and instruction.			
Learning objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop listening skills in order to comprehend spoken language. To realize the importance of listening to and understanding information. 			
Subject content: Challenge the students on their listening skills		Cross-curricular links: Math: telling time, drawing shapes	
Materials: Paper, projector, print outs, computer, whiteboard, pencils, rulers, speaker			
Lesson activities (Lesson one)	Time	Teaching strategies/actions	
The students are instructed to draw a picture based on my simple instructions. They can't ask any questions. Before I start the activity, I will make sure they all know the different shapes I will use and know left and right. Talk about the exercise and let the students know that we are going practice listening and comprehension with some fun activities. We will tune their listening skills.	10 min	The activity will be a fun introduction to what we will work with. The activity will provide the teacher with information on the students' level of understanding. Message abundance I will repeat myself many times in different ways to give them a chance to understand.	
Show a short YouTube video about following instructions. "Teach your dragon to follow instructions" read aloud. Talk about the story and the importance of listening to and following instructions.	10 min	Giving the students introductions through a visual story. Find out if they find the English dialect easy or difficult to understand.	
Quick brain-break with "Simon says"	5 min	Practice listening	
Picture dictation	10min	Practice their ability to follow step by step instructions.	

Instruct the student on how to make a timeline with a ruler on a piece of paper. Add times from 7:00am to 9:00pm. I will play an audio with a daily routine. The students will add pictures to a timeline showing the daily routine.		Prompt them with sentences that can be used to ask for clarification if necessary. Practice listening for specific information.
Follow directions Instruct the students to stand up and follow your directions. (3 steps right, 2 steps back, etc.) Split the kids in pairs and let them do the exercise together.	10 min	Interactive activity where the students can practice both listening and speaking.
Lesson activities (Lesson two)		
Simon says attention getter activity. Let some of the students try to be Simon.	5 min	Attention getter to get the class focused while practicing listening.
Hands up activity Introduce the activity. List the questions on the board that they are going to find the answer for. Read a text and let the students sit down when they hear an answer to a question.	10 min	Listen for information activity with an active twist. Practice having a specific focus while listening.
Matching game Introduce the activity. Each student is given a couple of pictures. As the teacher describes a picture the students are to find out if they have the picture described.	10 min	More listening with a specific focus.
Quick brain-break with a follow the instructions dance.	5 min	Active listening game.
Draw by directions The students are given some time to make a simple drawing. Walk around to check and guide the students. Give them a little time to practice how they will explain the steps for a listener. The kids are now going to find a friend to exchange drawings with.	15 min	The students can now take ownership of an activity and test their ability to give directions and follow directions with their friends.

One student explains while the other one draws, without looking at the actual picture. And then they switch.		
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Appendix 2

Classroom observations

Observations from teaching 2023.12.14

The students were engaged from the beginning and excited about what I was going to do with them.

They followed the first activity very well, but some of the kids, especially the girls, were not satisfied with the beauty of the drawing they had made. All the students more or less managed to follow the instructions for the drawing perfectly and when I told them that it wasn't about making a beautiful drawing but about showing me that they could follow instructions and that they had done very well, they all felt better.

They all sat still and listened to the YouTube story. They seemed to enjoy it and understand it. I asked if they could understand the speaker clearly, and they said they had no problem understanding what was said.

We tried to play the 'Simon Says' game, but they didn't really know it, and some of the kids got very frustrated because they kept messing it up. So, I stopped the game again quite fast and continued with my lesson.

They did very well follow my instructions and got everything ready for the exercise. One of the kids pointed out that this also was about listening and referred back to apart from the story they listened to.

They had difficulties understanding my 'Picture dictation' activity even though I tried to explain in different ways. So, we did the first part together and that got them going. Some of the kids stayed focused all through the activity and did their best to match the time and pictures. Others got frustrated after missing one piece of information and then stopped participating.

After giving everyone a pep-talk and encouraging them to do their best and just continue even though they miss one or two pieces of information, I started the activity over one more time. This time everyone except one kept their focus through the activity and they did very well. A kid asked me why they had to do this activity? And after telling him and the rest of the class that sometimes we need to go to a train station or airport, where we need to listen for information's from a speaker that we can't ask questions. Here it is important that we can listen for important information and this activity helped us practice that. Everyone just nodded and accepted that explanation.

Again, I asked if they felt like they could understand what the speaker was saying, and again they said that it wasn't a problem, they just thought that the audio was too fast for them to organize pictures and listen at the same time.

We finished off the lesson with a little game where everyone was actively participating and having fun.

Observations from teaching 2023.12.15

Today there was a student that didn't attend yesterday. He didn't seem to pay attention at the beginning and had a hard time keeping his hands still. After the first instructions I asked him to retell what we were going to do, and it became clear to me that his English abilities were limited. Some of his classmates even said at that point that he didn't understand English. From then on, I made an even greater deal out of explaining the steps of the activities and supporting the group or table where he was. It turned out fine and he managed to take part in the activities and keep his hands to himself.

Back to my general observation of the class. We started out with 'Simon Says' and today they were enjoying the game more. I also let a couple of the students try to be Simon. That turned out fine. The 'Hands Up' took some explaining and modeling, but when we did the actual activity, it worked. To me it seemed like the majority of the class could follow the video and listen for the answers, only a couple of the students had a hard time comprehending the video and just sat down as they saw everyone else do it. But they were focused and really trying.

The matching game went well. All kids were focused and maybe because I used descriptions like colors and sizes to describe the different bird pictures I decided to use for this activity, all the kids had a greater chance of comprehending and matching their picture to the description.

The brain break dance was a winner, they all loved it.

For the last activity the kids were very engaged and eager to start. I started by letting them know that the drawings that they were going to make should be super simple and that they should be able to explain the steps to draw it. I made both a good and a bad example on the board. I walked around and supported the students as they made their drawings and shared it with a friend. I saw that the kids were very focused and enjoying the activity. I also saw that some of the drawings turned out too difficult for them to explain and then they started to almost show their pair what to draw. I then guided them to make another drawing and try again. A lot of drawings were made, but the kids also did a good job communicating and listening to each other.