RESEARCH ARTICLE

LISTENING: BETWEEN AUDIOINGUAL AND CLT
A PROPOSAL FOR DEVELOPING A 'LISTENING-TO-NATIVE-SPEAKERS STRATEGY', FROM A LOCAL TERTIARY CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Finding an approach that perfectly fits a certain teaching context is usually not an easy task to do, and, similarly, a unified, global approach that is meant to be valid at every situation does not seem to be a realistic idea.A 'one-size-fits-all' usually fails to address all various socio-cultural and linguistic needs of a particular classroom to say the least. Therefore, the concept of theorising from the classroom when teachers equipped with required knowledge act as active researchers in their classes seems to be a possible solution towards finding the 'perfect' approach.

This paper, guided by beliefs in post-methods theories, refers to a context whereat communicative language teaching (CLT) materials are adopted, while the environment and the nature of learners' learning styles are not suitable for such a method. The paper particularly focuses on figuring out or adapting a strategy for teaching the listening skill to freshmen, according to the context reality. Since the materials are native-speakers' products, the strategy seeks to have students adapted to the products' level in terms of listening.

INTRODUCTION

Most teachers feel comfortable with their own teaching styles, and they naturally would be reluctant to accept the idea of following certain educational theories that might be imposed on them. Such reluctance might become greater when these teachers are pushed to employ what theorists call 'best method' or 'best practice'; one which is assumed to fit every context, i.e. 'one-size-fits-all'. The teachers' styles sometimes can be affected by local contexts, which in itself affect teaching practices.

Richards (1990), for example, supports the idea of a unified approach for effective teaching, which is based on the theory of 'best practices'. According to his top-down viewpoint, such practices are more concerned with the study of classroom practices, in order to develop methodological principles, as well as the

processes used by effective teachers. Therefore, he indicates that second language teaching professionals fairly understand that methods are merely outcomes of classroom interactions, in which students, teachers, activities, and materials are involved.

On the contrary, Kumaravadivelu (2006: 165) branded the idea of a unified approach to fit all as 'a myth'. According to Cumming (2008), one theory to satisfy or dominate all interests and situations seems to be impossible In TESOL, yet its useful role seems to help people appreciate the many complex dimensions on which English learning varies. Prabhu (1990, 1992) argues that the idea of searching for the best method is better be abandoned in order to improve language teaching, and instead to focus on understanding the complex interaction of curricular, interpersonal, and methodological factors in actual classroom practices.

Indeed, the concept of developing or adjusting methodology to address local contexts' needs has now been well recognized and adopted by many researchers. The constant growth of needs analysis studies can be a solid proof of this claim, as it reflects that researchers do understand that the contexts they are dealing with are unique hence need specific conduct.

The premise of 'theorizing from the classroom' theory views local or insider teachers, once equipped with sufficient competence, can identify distinctive features of a specific classroom situation probably better than an outsider theorist. The classroom features which can be analysed by teachers play key-role in understanding learners' needs and abilities, hence methods need to be adjusted by local teachers to perfectly fit the context, compared to those developed with less attention paid to the milieu in which they are to be applied.

This paper will focus on teaching the listening skill as part of a curriculum built on CLT. The materials used for listening, which is designed and introduced by native speakers, seem to be problematic to students due to their unfamiliarity with the accents used, besides their low proficiency levels. Thus, an alternative approach that can fit into an aspect of Audi-lingual method is needed, in an attempt to meet the learners' needs and abilities. More details about the strategy will be provided throughout the paper.

It seems like most educationists in this context share a common belief that English materials and methods should only be imported from the English speaking countries to ensure better learning; such a belief may well justify the reasons why less efforts have been dedicated to theorize their own context. Therefore, they tend to use curriculums that are higher than their students' levels and beyond their current state of knowledge. In fact, this problem is culminated every time they introduce such curriculums ignoring both the students' current level and the type of curriculum they have been taught with.

The premise of the proposed strategy is based on the students' wishes to go beyond the noo-native varieties of English they are familiar with to the native Englishes. As with the current reality of teaching and testing listening, teachers are said to act passively during these classes. They only play the recording materials, waiting patiently for the students doing the tasks. When Field (1998) called for modifying certain methodologies that had been followed before late 1960s and early 1970s, he indicated that learners always had "a wish to relate the nature of listening practised in the classroom to the kind of listening that takes place in real life."

Literature Review

The literature review will deal with two areas; the first will be based on the concept of theorising from local contexts and classrooms in general, while the second with underpin the specific problem approached in this paper.

Best Methods and Local Contexts

Many researchers, such as Holliday (1994), Bax (2003), Kumaravadivelu (2006) and Cumming (2008), stress the important role played by the local context in L2 (second language) classroom. For instance, Kumaravadivelu (2006:165) points to the role of 'local knowledge' in designing approaches and methods of teaching foreign languages, he states that, "we forget that people have been learning and teaching foreign languages long before modern methods arrived in the scene." Teachers are encouraged to observe the teaching and learning process in their own classes, so they can develop theories that can help them and their

students achieve the planned objectives.Kumaravadivelu (2001:554) thinks that teachers should "do research in a casual way-observing what they do, reflecting on why they do what they do, monitoring its intended and unintended effects, and then modifying their behaviour in light of lessons learned."That is, to work as researchers in order to develop what might be called 'personal theories', and to help teachers improving their teaching.

Kumaravadivelu (2006) believes that in order to help practicing teachers develop their own theory of practice, their methods must be more sensitive to local exigencies, keeping the multiplicity of learners identities in mind, alongside other macrostructures -the social, cultural, political, and historical- that shape and reshape the microstructures of the pedagogic enterprise. Clarke (1994) and Halliday (1994) argue that individuals involved in developing theories are seldom full-time language teachers themselves; hence teachers, who are usually considered as less expert than theorists, now constitute the fulcrum of educational reform, and must be cast as central to the field. Then they become seen as agents in the process of theory construction, curriculum planning, and policy development, rather than merely implementers of dicta.However, the theories teachers may come up with cannot be simply generalized, the same reason to why they cannot easily and directly apply the ready-made theories.

While doing their jobs, teachers unconsciously practice certain norms and routines that can be considered as methods. The reflections they make can greatly help promoting the teaching/learning process(Kumaravadivelu, 2001: 540).

Cumming (2008) elaborates that, in addition to novice and experienced teachers, learners, young and old, educational administrators, policy makers, university researchers and scholars, and even parents and family members should be involved in English teaching and learning.

According to Bell (2003:325), going 'beyond methods' can be considered as an approach that can relieve teachers from method limitations and energize their practices by providing new options to the classroom. With such flexibility, teachers can base their acts with more autonomy, which should eventually help them theorize their methods with social and cultural contexts in mind, as well as other educational factors. Kumaravadivelu's (2001:537) notion of 'particularity' is worth noting here as it is related to context sensitivity, it "seeks to facilitate the advancement of a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy that is based on a true understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural, and political particularities."

Saudi Learners and the Skill of Listening:

Generally, English is the students' predicament when they join universities in Saudi Arabia. The transition from Arabic-medium to fully English-medium contexts is a major key why the situation is problematic. Besides, other factors related to the previous formal schooling journey in terms of teaching/learning English. At this level of education, students are required to understand the meaning of listening rather than merely trying to catch separate words or simple statements, i.e. they need to move to the level of input comprehensibility rather than merely intelligibility (Smith, 1992). Yet, intelligibility is still the first step or route towards comprehensibility. They need to listen for 'information' as well as 'gist', they simultaneously need the strategies for extracting meaning and acquiring new language.The objectives now are different than those in their previous context; this case requires sorts of knowledge - semantic, syntactic and pragmatic– besides the local, general and cultural (Flowerdew and Miller, 2005) which,of course, they lack.

That said, listening lessons are at the top of the students' challenges. They find great difficulty in following native speakers by whom the audio materials are recorded. No matter how well-planned is the lesson, the teacher has to replay the audio material several times to have his/her students understood some chunks of the conversation or whatever is being listened to, and do the tasks that follow.

 In fact, listening to authentic 'native' connected speech in English is difficult even to those who have been introduced to its phonology and phonetics, as its rhythmic and rapid nature makes it so. Thus, we can easily imagine these students in this challenging situation keeping in mind that they have never been exposed to English in such excessive manner. During their formal years of education, the main purpose of the majority was just to pass exams.

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This takes us to the sociolinguistics area of native- and non-native speakers intelligibility. Since English is the medium of instruction in Higher Education, the majority of teachers are currently, non-native, mostly Asian, besides some Arabs who should also abide by the agenda of EMI (English as medium of instruction).

Such a situation in fact represent a mismatch between what is being taught and what is being encountered at daily basis. That is, the materials used for teaching and testing the listening skill is produced by native speakers, exclusively British or American, whereas the English varieties with which students are supposedly familiar are non-native. This has been reported by several students and teacherswhile discussing the reasons behind the failure in listening classes and tests. Indeed, a number of studies show that, unlike other non-native varieties of English, natural native speech is in most cases unintelligible to such learners, (Smith and Rafiqzad, 1997; Nash, 1969; Ghobain, 2014; Ma; 2009).

The Local Context and Stakeholders: Most researchers believe that the Saudi classroom is teacher-centred and most students therefore are over reliant on their teachers in a way that is capable of deterring modern teaching styles such as CLT. Researches also noted that there are not enough opportunities for Saudi students to practice English apart from the classroom, which makes it difficult for them to find a link between communicative competence and real life as well as causing students to be demotivated. Thus, despite the availability of modern materials and well-equipped laboratories, the opportunity for the students to get used to the new milieu is still somehow hapless.

The sample I am referring to in this paper includes female business school students. They are attending their first year, first level, in Jazan University. The age level, linguistic background, and English proficiency level of students are almost identical, i.e. Arab female students at their late teen ages or early twenties who have been studying English as a requirement in their previous schooling journey. During their formal years in high schools, students are expected to learn English through unified English curriculum provided by the ministry of education.

3. The Proposed Approach

To avoid the students'apprehensionwhen encountering native authentic speech, a carefully graded method should be followed, something like audio-lingual and role-play. The strategy should begin with groups of students doing the recordings themselves, with the transcripts given to them in advance, progressively towards the end where authentic native materials introduced. Under teachers' supervisions, students to listen to the audio at hand, then use the labs materials and technology to achieve the task, trying to produce a version close to native as much as possible. A timetable is to be made with all students' names listed, showing the roles and dates of when they will perform. This timetable should be designed according to the students' convenience, i.e. no pressure to be put on a student's load. During the lesson, the teacher presents a short pre-listening task just to build up the students' schemas. Then, they extendedly listen together to the original material and the one produced by their colleagues. Instead of keeping playing only the original in vain and hopelessly, the teacher willingly playback when needed. The whole class should participate in judging how closer the performers are to the original version, the teacher is highly involved in this part comparing between the two and illustrating some phonological aspects to the students. She should distribute the scripts to discuss and underline the weak unstressed words. Finally, she introduces the post-listening tasks, dividing the class into two subgroups, excluding the performers. Students should work together to do the tasks as if they are in a competition. Their reflections and feedbacks about how did they achieve should be listened to at the end of each session. Since all of them are involved, the most competent and lower-level students, this shall encourage them to be accustomed to group work and pair tasks which they are unfamiliar with. Such a situation is also a good opportunity for them to practice English. According to Field (ibid), a learner who is a risk-taker in speaking is also likely to be a risk-taker in listening.

4. Broader Issues that Could Be Raised from Theorizing from the Classroom

As we established from the previous sections, teachers do not work in a vacuum but rather in a context where various parties are contributing. Bearing this in mind, I would assume that it is natural to have some level of involvement from one or more of the classroom contributors. As theorizing from the classroom

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might be a novel idea in most Saudi classes, it might raise concerns from all parties involved especially those superior to the teacher. Educational authorities might want to see more evidence of its efficacy before such practice becomes widespread. It is also very important to understand the authorities given to teachers in order to speculate if this practice would raise any ideological issues.

Despite the fact that this practice would occur in a specific context, teachers can and should do it with utmost respect for the local culture by which I mean not involving themes or ideas that would be rejected by the locals. Once necessary precautions are taken, local issues should not be a real concern for practicing teachers.

Limitations and Challenges:

In the medical school, everything was available for teachers- time and materials. But coming to the students' side, although they have expressed their willingness to cooperate with their teachers, but their time is heavily loaded with reading and exams, teachers in this case have difficulty waiting for free time their students might have to achieve the designed tasks for listening.

Conclusion

Developing or adjusting methodology to address local context's needs is a very important topic that is worthy of more investigation. A local or insider teacher, once equipped with sufficient competence, can identify distinctive features of a specific classroom situation probably better than an outsider theorist. The classroom features which can be analysed by teachers play key-role in understanding learners' needs and abilities, hence methods adjusted by local teachers perfectly fit the context, compared to those developed with less attention paid to the milieu in which to be applied.

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