

The Product Approach and the Process Approach to Teaching EFL/ESL Listening: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:- This study holds a comparison between the product approach and the process approach to teaching EFL/ESL listening. To this end, it explores the two approaches from a theoretical and practical point of view. As such, this comparative study is multi-dimensional and therefore focuses on such aspects as the principles and premises underlying these two approaches along with how they translate into the teaching and learning practices with regard to EFL/ESL listening. In other words, the study looks at how these approaches manifest themselves as performance and behavior in terms of classroom activities, the role of the teacher and that of the student, and most importantly how their tenets affect the learning atmosphere prevailing in the ESL/EFL listening classroom while these approaches are being implemented by the target language listening teacher.

Keywords:- Product Approach, Process Approach, EFL/ESL Listening.

I. INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction, it should be noted that EFL listening remains the least grasped and the least taught of all language skills (Field, 2008; Mendelsohn, 2001; Nation & Newton, 2009). As a result, little theoretical and research-based knowledge is available on listening compared to other language skills, especially writing and reading in which great progress has been made (Nunan, 1998). While approaches to teaching reading and writing are fully-fledged, approaches to teaching listening are still in their infancy and the principles underlying them are not yet as well-defined as those underlying the approaches to teaching reading and writing in particular (Siegel, 2015). When it comes to approaches to teaching listening, great vertigo and ambiguity still surround their premises and it takes a lot of work to understand how they can find their way into the EFL classroom. The same applies to the product approach and the process approach to teaching EFL listening though the former is relatively easier to grasp than the latter. While the tenets of the former are relatively easy to understand, those of the latter are a bit abstract to grasp and hence require more effort to deduce their implementation at the classroom level in terms of activities, teacher's role and student's role. Hence, this comparison is part descriptive and part prescriptive.

II. PRINCIPLES AND PREMISES

The way listening is taught by both approaches reflects and reveals how EFL/ESL listening is perceived and envisioned by them. As such, the development of listening

within the product approach is primarily a matter of repeated exposure to spoken language and therefore listening is naturally, effortlessly and unconsciously acquired through repeated listening to the target language texts. In other words, the more the learner listens to spoken language, the more his listening develops especially when it comes to audio texts followed or accompanied by listening comprehension questions, which implies that the "teaching" of listening must be implicit rather than explicit as stipulated by the other approaches, especially the process approach.

Unlike the product approach, the process approach, on the other hand, views EFL/ESL listening as an active skill requiring explicit instruction in its own right rather than implicit instruction provided by mere exposure to the target spoken text (Field, 2008). For the proponents of the process approach, L2 listening differs greatly from L1 listening (Aljasser, 2008; Field, 2008) and therefore their development is not done in exactly the same way despite the fact that the listening processes are more or less the same (Buck, 2001). L1 listening and L2 listening are distinct in that native language listening is effortless and unconsciously acquired or rather picked up while the L2 listening requires great training so that the learner can transfer the listening processes of the mother tongue to his L2 listening (Cutler, 2012; Goh, 2000; Hassan, 2000; Lynch, 2009). As such, the process approach provides training rather than the practice provided by the product approach.

III. TEACHER'S AND STUDENT'S ROLE

The role of the teacher and that of the student are dictated by the approach guiding the teaching-learning process as a whole. Their roles vary depending on whether the approach is teacher-centered or learner-centered. The functioning of the role of the teacher and the role of the student in teaching ESL/EFL listening is no exception. The role of the teacher and that of the learner in a listening lesson are dictated by the principles that underlie the approach taken to teaching the listening skill. To illustrate this, the role of the teacher in the product approach (also called comprehension approach) is that of a listening controller (Field, 2008). The teacher controls almost everything (Field, 2008; Siegel, 2015). His roles center around choosing the listening material, deciding what is important in it through the questions he asks, checking the students' answers, and providing the correct answer in case the students do not come up with one (Field, 2008). In other words, the teacher is primarily a tester rather than a teacher of listening. Since the teacher has a lot of control over the listening lesson, the learner's role is essentially that of a passive responder (Field,

2008). Simply put, the student has no say in the listening process because the material writer and the teacher have specified his tasks in advance, which completely contradicts the way listening takes place in real-life situations beyond school (Field, 2008). In the product approach, the teacher and the textbook designer decide for the learner what is important in the spoken text and therefore what to listen to and focus on (Field, 2008). The opponents of the product approach and the proponents of the process approach argue that this view of listening is reductionist in nature and does not reflect the many active roles played by the listener in real-life listening in terms of concentration, interaction, meaning negotiation and interpretation, to name but a few (Field, 2008; Siegel, 2015).

By extension, EFL/ESL listening in the classroom must necessarily mirror real-world listening in which the listener plays an active rather than a passive role. The listener decides for himself what is important to him, what to listen to and what to focus on in the spoken text. This is because people can listen to the same spoken text but focus on different parts of its content depending on what they deem important to them. More than that, they may focus on the same aspect that is important to them, but they develop different, opposing, even contradictory interpretations and meanings (Brown, 1994), which can be negotiated with the speaker himself or with the members of the audience. By implication, while the teacher is exclusively interested in the correct answer (and not the answers) in the product approach (Field, 2008), the process approach postulates that a spoken text is rich in meaning and therefore open to many different interpretations. Comprehension questions asked about a spoken text can generate different answers that are all correct rather than just one single answer as is the rule in the product approach. In other words, the role of the teacher is essentially that of a facilitator of the listening (Field, 2008), and therefore his role is to make the students interact with the speaker and to negotiate his literal, intentional and implicit meaning. Thus, the student has almost total control over the listening process and lesson (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012) and fully supports and takes total charge of his listening development (Field, 2008). In case of difficulty or problem, the teacher intervenes to detect where the listening has failed or rather collapsed and provides constructive feedback to the listener to help solve the problem (Brown, 2011; Brown, 2013; Field, 2008). In doing so, the teacher serves as a feedback provider that helps weaker students as he is an expert ESL/EFL listener who has accumulated extensive experience in the field.

IV. CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

It is common knowledge that the adoption of a certain approach not only affects classroom management and the educational process, but also and above all exerts an influence on the psychological atmosphere of the classroom. As the product approach tends to test rather than teach listening with an exclusive interest in the correct answer, this approach transforms the psychological atmosphere of learning into one of anxiety and stress (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). This is mainly because the "incorrect" answer is not welcome, which puts great pressure on students to find the correct answer by

all means. The classroom atmosphere within the product approach is very similar to that of the TOEIC and TOEFL listening tests. Students are reluctant to engage in listening and listening development adopting a defeatist attitude as their teacher adopts a pass or fail one (Field, 2008). The students therefore do not feel safe enough to "take risks" because their answers are confronted with neglect rather than with constructive feedback, which undermines their motivation and the development of their listening skill. The process approach treats students' responses differently by welcoming all their responses rather than judging them. As such, the classroom atmosphere is psychologically positive and supportive and students feel safe to negotiate the meaning of any spoken text while receiving the necessary feedback when needed, as priority is given to teaching rather than testing listening.

V. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The vision of EFL/ESL listening and the approach to teaching it often find their way into the classroom in the form of teaching activities and practices. While the product approach adopts a listen-answer-check model when it comes to EFL/ESL listening (Siegel, 2014), the process approach adopts a purely curative and remedial mode. With regard to the listening stages, a typical listening consists of three stages; namely the pre-listening stage, the while-listening stage and the post-listening stage (Underwood, 1989). These stages, however, do not receive the same importance, attention and time in the two approaches. If the product approach favors the pre-listening stage over the other stages, the while-listening stage is the most important stage in the process approach. During the pre-listening stage in the product approach, the teacher prolongs and extends setting the scene for the listening activity by providing too much information about the target listening text and pre-teaching too much vocabulary as if to prepare the students to come up with and find the correct answer when they listen to the text. Thus, pre-listening activities implicitly disclose most of the target listening text. For the while-listening stage, the listen-answer-check cycle is simply applied to all the exercises which usually come in the form of true/false statements, fill-in-the-blank exercises, comprehension questions, etc. What determines the teacher's movement from exercise to exercise is the correct answer provided by the students or provided by the teacher himself after the students have failed to come up with it. The students providing the "correct" answer are praised and the weaker students are left behind without any feedback or help with their listening and where it has broken down. The post-listening stage is rarely done and if done it takes most often the form of filling in the blanks in the transcript version of the listening text.

In terms of dealing with the stages of a listening lesson in the process approach, the pre-listening stage is minimal in the sense that the stage provides only the information deemed necessary to set the scene and context for the listening activity. During the pre-listening stage, the teacher pre-teaches only the key unguessable vocabulary items, the incomprehension of which will hamper, hinder or even block the students' understanding of the essential meaning of the

text. While the process approach gives little importance to the pre-listening stage, the while-listening stage is the most important stage since it resembles real-life listening and the teacher's intervention is retained as a last resort. The activities of this stage come in the form of pair and group discussions and negotiations of students' understandings and interpretations of the literal, intended, and implied meanings of the speaker or speakers in the listening text. Weaker students receive the feedback needed to overcome the difficulties that have hindered their listening. In the post-listening stage, students have the opportunity to listen critically to the opinions and viewpoints of the speaker or speakers while making connections between the content of the spoken text and their life experiences. In doing so, they interact with the text not only with its content but also and above all with its content in light of what they have experienced themselves, which makes their listening meaningful and real.

VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, based on this comparative analysis of the different aspects of the product and the process approach to teaching EFL/ESL listening, it can be concluded that the process approach can serve as a better and more positive alternative to the product approach. Although the product approach continues to test students' current listening skill, it does not do enough to systematically develop the listening skill of the weaker students who struggle with listening (Brown & Hilferty, 1986; Sheerin, 1987). The process approach seems to fill this gap and aims to teach and develop rather than test listening (Field, 1998; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Nonetheless, further research is essential to confirm or refute this hypothesis. Unless an experimental study comparing their effects is conducted (Cross & Vandergrift, 2015) this will remain a mere assumption.

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