

‘Measures to Improve Comprehension of English Language at School Level’

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Introduction:

As it is mentioned earlier in the Abstract of the present Research Paper the researcher is going to put forward measures to improve comprehension of English Language at school level as learning Language is based on four basic skills of language, viz, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. It is widely known that all these skills need comprehension as they have their own importance for each Listener, Speaker, Reader and Writer. Without comprehension all the skills communication will be null and void. Similarly, both teaching and learning processes are also impossible to take place without comprehension from both sides i.e. student and teacher, the speaker and listener, dictation and writing and reader with self. Thus comprehension is not important in relation with only one of these skills but all. In addition to this every teaching method couldn't be taught without comprehension especially, Grammar-Translation, The Phonetic Method, The Audio-lingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching, Total Physical Response Approach and Immersion Programs. To improve comprehension in English Language, according to *Dr. M. S. Thirumalai*, one must need to have some key aspects in him or her. These are *contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, strategies, aptitude, motivation, attitudes and empathy*. Besides, use of Black Board in the school level classrooms, with colour chalks for various purposes, continues to be a very important teaching aid throughout the world. It is the cheapest visual aid available in every classroom. As the paper is only about English Language comprehension, English should be used as much as possible and as frequently in these classes. For this, teachers should say simple things to organize the lesson – starting or stopping an activity, getting students to do or not to do things e.g. the teacher gives simple commands and instructions; expression in English such as:

Open the window.

Open the door.

Stand up.

Sit down.

Look at me.

Open/Close your books.

Come here, please.

Be quiet, please.

As a teacher of school level English, he should familiarize himself with some simple visual aids (himself, the blackboard, real objects, flashcards, pictures, charts, OHP, Visual Presenter etc.) which would help him to teach the structure and words smoothly and emphatically. He should develop his skills to prepare his own visual aids and know how to operate and use the visual aids effectively. The teacher can also use gestures, facial expressions and actions to show the meaning of words and illustrate situations. In this way, comprehension at all levels is based on how the teacher helps and facilitates the students to understand English language as if it is their mother-tongue.

Now let's know how to improve comprehension of English language at school level by applying the same basic skills in a new way:

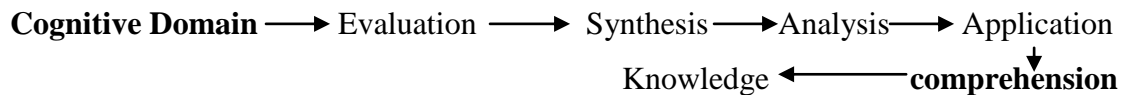
A. Teaching Comprehensible Listening Skill:

At the school level English teaching classes the listening skill is the most neglected one both in first and second language. But listening is like painting, like color, in day to day environment. One doesn't notice, but it is always there in casual chats, face to face encounters, telephone messages, for enjoyment of radio and television programs, formal lectures, and so on. Speaking and writing were considered to be productive but active skills. Listening was supposed as passive skill but it focuses on reception of information and hence it should not be considered as fully passive skill. There is a need for an active involvement of the self for the efficient performance of listening. The listener is forced to guess an approximation to what the speaker is communicating. Listening becomes the stepping stone for action. All these and other activities are involved in listening as it needs active participation of the listener. It is to be remembered that listening is an integral part of any type of language performance. There are number of models of classifying the educational objectives have developed. Recently, the taxonomical models are developed by *B.S. Bloom* in his '*Taxonomy of Educational Objectives – Cognitive and Effective Domains*' and his associates by *R.H. Dave* in his '*Developing of Educational Testing*,

Vol. I. There are three domains in taxonomy of educational objectives based on biological sciences:

- i. Cognitive domain: related to knowledge.
- ii. Affective domain: related to feeling.
- iii. Psychomotor domain: related to doing.

The very first one is most concerned domain to the English language comprehension is which can be presented in the following model –



In this way, through the following measures the listening skill can be acquired by school level students:

- A.** In the early stages of listening comprehension, the students have to be taught and exposed to discrimination of sounds English used in isolation and combination, not simply as sounds in themselves in isolation, but as meaningful units of words.
- B.** In all places and in all classes we can practice English listening comprehension by beginning with the identification of natural listening situations both in and outside the classroom.
- C.** The students are in the process of developing knowledge. Hence they like to listen to the teacher. For this the teacher has to give commands in English and also cut some jokes occasionally using English.
- D.** Listening comprehension is practiced in all places, lessons and in all language skills. For this sake some exercises should be given on the phonological elements when pronunciation is taught, grammar teaching and while vocabulary teaching.
- E.** Listening comprehension can be progressed through, classroom style English, outside spoken English, how to listen lectures and take notes, comprehend native speakers in all situations, including radio and TV, cultural and spoken imitation etc.
- F.** Similarly, identifying the listening medium is also good practice for comprehension testing. Such as let them listen to some dialogues/speeches and identify whether it is face to face interaction, a movie or a TV program? Or is it a lecture situation, a telephonic conversation etc.?
- G.** Listening, thinking and remembering go hand in hand as they are inseparable acts. The teacher should organize his/her lesson, presentation and teaching in such a

way that listening, thinking, and remembering is all integrated in listening comprehension.

- H.** Listening comprehension should be considered as an inevitable practice and students' performance should be looked for progress.
- I.** The teacher and even the materials on tape/cassette recorders become the major means to train the students in listening comprehension. For this they have to listen to the teacher or the recorded material and perform the task asked for.
- J.** Thus, it is important to include listening comprehension exercises to teach variations of style in English. Such exercises help students understand the English spoken outside the classroom. Hence, it is important to discuss the factors concerning the style of a particular passage given for listening comprehension. Focus on the speakers, situation, content, mood, channel, etc. Even the variations on theme, on sound, grammar and vocabulary, and ask students how the dialogues differ. Through such exercises students become sensitive to style difference.

Generally, English listening competence is a complex skill that needs conscious development. It can be best developed with practice when students reflect on the process of listening without the threat of evaluation. Guiding students through the process of listening provides them with the knowledge from which they can successfully complete a listening task; it also motivates them and puts them in control of their learning. It was found that by focusing on the process of listening students acquired a useful tool to raise their English comprehensible competence. The results of the experiment indicate that listening comprehension is foundational in learning a foreign language. Furthermore, listening comprehension levels do influence the capacity for improvement in other language skills such as speaking, reading, writing and translating. The evidence from this study suggests reasons for emphasizing listening comprehension. However, improving school level students' ability as English speakers is a demanding process and there are still many factors, intellectual and non-intellectual, subjective and objective, influencing language acquisition that need to be considered and further explored.

II. Teaching Comprehensible Speaking Skill:

There are different ways of teaching speaking comprehension. Speaking without comprehension is a highly impossible task. *'Twice think before act'* simply tells the same thing. In any dialogue a feedback to the speaker's speech is possible

only when the listener is comprehended the meaning of his speech. Otherwise it will be just bombardment or prattle. This skill could be developed through the following ways:

A) GUESSING:

As it is discussed in the above skill, guessing is important for listening comprehension. Guessing can be used also to develop speaking skill. Through the process of guessing, students are encouraged to see the patterns of usage and to 'invent' the correct words and sentences. Students will guess words and sentences that have not yet been taught to them. Through guessing, students work out the rules of deriving new words for themselves.

B) DIRECT DIALOGUES:

In this teacher gives some dialogues to the students and directs them how to request, order etc. Then the students comprehend what the teacher expects from them and compare the situation to their day to day experience and perform the act. Here they identify the appropriate part of the teacher's utterance that would become their response, manipulate the grammatical structure suitable, and then produce the correct response.

C) ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS:

Another way of teaching comprehensible speaking is to ask the student a question. He will try to answer if he realizes that he is being asked to answer a question. For this, he should understand what the question is, and he should have some mastery over the English phonology, grammar, and lexicon necessary to frame an appropriate answer. Speaking skill in English includes more than adequacy of pronunciation. The ultimate goal of the speaking skill in English is to enable the learner to communicate with comprehension his or her thoughts, ideas and feelings via oral language to meet the needs faced by him/her.

D) IMITATION AND REPETITION:

Imitation and repetition are inter-related, and yet they are distinct. It helps the student to pronounce and produce the English utterance as accurate as produced by the teacher. It does not mean only to produce sounds, phrases and sentences but produce with comprehension. It is a sort of memorization of the sound through repetition. For this, the teacher may use pictures, gestures, pantomime, translation, guessing and drawing on the board to make the students comprehend the meaning. It will help them to practice producing native-like utterances at the sound level.

E) SUBSTITUTION:

It helps the students to produce new utterances and to develop comprehensible speaking skill. From single word substitution, one may proceed to multiple word substitution in the same slot, without making grammatical changes in the frame:

This is a Pencil : This is a long pencil.

Let's go to the cinema (theatre).

Let's go to the theatre (library).

Let's play football (hockey).

Let's eat pizza (milk).

F) DAY-TO-TODAY EXPRESSIONS:

Expressions of greeting, gratitude, small talk, introductions and making acquaintance, leave-taking, appreciation, expressions of regret and asking to be excused, etc., are very important comprehensible communicative acts for school level students need to master. The students may be asked to memorize them and practice using them appropriate to the occasion. These practice sentences should be so framed that these are useful and extendable to a variety of real situations. Small talk revolves around weather in English. One begins a conversation with another by commenting on weather.

G) SIMPLE QUESTION-ANSWER DIALOGUES:

There are three types of question in English: yes/no questions, 'or' question, and WH-questions e.g. Do you drink tea? Do you prefer tea of coffee? What do you usually drink? What is this? From this simple process of starting a dialogue the teacher may proceed to ask more complex question. Dialogues can be taught by three types of drills viz, **choral drill** (entire class participates); **chain drill** (one student asks question and another answers); and **individual drill** (individual students are pointed out and directed by teacher to utter dialogue). Eliciting long answers helps the student to comprehend and compose his thoughts in English, search for appropriate words and structures and use them in the appropriate order. This brings out his English grammatical knowledge.

H) SHOW AND TELL:

In this activity, students are encouraged to bring a favorite toy or object of any kind to class. Let the students bring only those objects which they can handle using the level of competence they have. They show their classmates what they have

brought. They also tell them about it: how they got it, where it came from, what is it used for or what it can do, etc. This provides a good opportunity for self-expression.

I) ROLE PLAY/SKIT:

It is the liveliest form to get the class involved in speaking comprehensively. It brings situations from real life into the classroom. Students imagine and assume roles. They create a pretend situation, and they pretend to be some different persons. Teachers should select the roles beforehand so that the roles to be assumed are familiar and are within the linguistic competence attained until then by the students. Roles such as friends, brothers, sisters, parents, teachers, shopkeepers, police officers, characters from the textbook and popular television programs etc. can be performed for better comprehensible English speaking as suggested by *Doff* in his *Teach English – A Training Course for Teachers..* Role-play or skit involves several students at once and holds the attention and comprehension of the class, even as it enables students to be original and produce utterances often on their own.

J) USE OF ENGLISH IN REAL WORLD:

Use of English in the real world will demand a competence that solely revolves around the student's attainment and comprehension of English. Several community interaction activities are advised in order to develop the speaking skill in real world situations. Task-oriented Assignments should be given to students which will require oral communication between the student and the community. Translation is another helpful device to encourage students to speak in English. The students can be given some sentences in their own native language and asked to translate them and use these to answer or ask questions. There are several other ways of using translation as a tool to develop comprehensible speaking skill. The student should have the ability to produce expressions in a manner comprehensible to native speakers of English. "He should learn to use gestures, pointing, finger counting, etc. that will support his attempts at oral communication, and he should have the means of enlarging his vocabulary when bilinguals are available, by asking questions to clarify meanings and pronunciation" says *Bowen J. Donald* in his *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*.

F.G. French has rightly pointed out about spoken English in his *Teaching English as an International Language*, "Speech is the ground work; all the rest are build up from it. Through speech, the pupil learns to make the direct connection between the English word or phrase and the object, action or idea it bears. He learns

the habit of using words in the correct sentence-patterns and phrase-patterns and he can learn this in no other way.” So, speaking is fundamental to English learning.

III. Teaching Comprehensible Reading Skill:

Reading comprehension research has a long and rich history. There is much that we can say about both the nature of reading comprehension as a process and about effective reading comprehension instruction. Most of what we know has been learned since 1975. Why have we been able to make so much progress so fast? We believe that part of the reason behind this steep learning curve has been the lack of controversy about teaching comprehension. Unlike decoding, oral reading, and reading readiness, those who study reading comprehension instruction have avoided much of the acrimony characteristic of work in other aspects of reading. Much work on the process of reading comprehension has been grounded in studies of good readers. It can be observed that good readers are those:

- ✓ Good readers are active readers.
- ✓ Good readers typically look over the text before they read for reading goals.
- ✓ Good readers frequently make predictions about what is to come.
- ✓ They read selectively, continually making decisions about their reading – what to read carefully, quickly, what not to read, what to reread etc.
- ✓ Good readers construct, revise, and question the meanings while reading.
- ✓ Good readers try to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and concepts in the text, and they deal with inconsistencies or gaps as needed.
- ✓ Good readers read different kinds of text differently.
- ✓ Comprehension is a consuming, continuous and complex activity, but for good readers, it is both satisfying and productive.

Thus, reading indicates towards knowing of language. It helps in knowing world's news, important information through newspapers, journals, books etc. It is a source of recreation. In leisure hours, one can go through books, magazines, journals. *C. C. Fries* in his *Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language* says, “Our main purpose in developing the ability to read among our children is that we wish to put them in possession of the power gaining pleasure and profit from the printed page.” Thus, it is a good source of self-education. According to *Lord Bacon*, “Reading maketh a full man.” Hence, the learners of English must know reading English. Objectives of understanding and speaking English do not undermine the objective of reading English which is why reading English is important.

Reading begins with oral reading or reading aloud when the young children are taught to read. They associate the letters with the sounds these letters represent. They read aloud the letter and their combinations. Young children read aloud the letters and soon they recognize or realize that the letters and the sounds they represent stand for a group or series of sounds which occur somewhat sequentially and constitutes the word. Hence, reading is closely related to the development of writing. School level children have some reading skill in their first language; they bring this skill to bear upon their reading ability in English. Oral and silent readings refer to the mechanics of reading. But *Crystal David* says in his *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of language* that “Reading is appreciating the sense of what is written: we read for meaning”.

Richard R. Day in his *New Ways in Teaching Reading* has given following three kinds of reading:

- a) **Extensive Reading:** It refers to the teaching of reading through reading. It is assumed in this type of reading that the best way for students to learn to read is by reading a great deal of comprehensible material.
- b) **Intensive Reading:** It is used to refer to the actual teaching of reading skills in an instructional setting. Hence, it is instruction-based and forms the core of teaching reading to the school children.
- c) **Oral Reading:** It attracts much attention from many school teachers but it is ‘an integral part of the teaching of reading’.

There are three stages to acquire English language with its proper comprehension from even the child as a beginner. They are as follows:

i) Beginner’s Reading:

The beginner students are exposed to the association of the letters of the English alphabet with their relevant sounds in appropriate contexts. In this process, they discover the relationship between the alphabet and the spoken language. Students are given groups of simple words, phrases, and sentences with focus on one or two letters and their combinations. They are introduced to the correspondence between the individual letters and their combinations in graded steps. They come to internalize, in an inductive manner, the possibilities of sound values for each letter, or combination of letter. Emphasis is thus on decoding graphic information from the words, phrases and sentences. Students begin to read new combinations of vocabulary and sentence-level structures. They develop an

ability to predict the sound values represented by the letters and their combinations in contexts. Thus, reading is not only to learn more meanings and forms in English, but also to gain knowledge of the structures of English.

ii) Intermediate Reading:

This stage fosters interest in reading, and develops the actual reading skill practiced throughout one's life beyond mastering the association between letters and sounds. Students no more read aloud. They are comfortable with predicting the sound values of letters and their combinations, and they begin to read for the purpose for which they originally enrolled themselves in the school/class. Emphasis here is on developing additional reading skills. They begin to read advanced English passages. Reading with comprehensible purpose is the focus here.

iii) Advanced Reading:

School level learners are quite satisfied with their accomplishment in the intermediate reading stage. However, reading is a continuing process, and they need to be introduced to the reading of authentic materials for specific purposes. Stories re-told, and abridged and adapted versions are the focus in intermediate level. But at the advanced level originals are presented for individualized self-learning. Through reading, diction, grammar, and comprehensible communicative efficiency improve. Through reading, students develop empathy for the language as well as for the content of the text they read; the best traditions of the culture the language comes to represent in their comprehension.

IV. Teaching Comprehensible Writing Skill:

According to *Bacon*, "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man and writing an exact man." *Mahatma Gandhi* also says about writing, "Fair and legible handwriting makes a man perfect in all walks of life." Writing is a means preserving the knowledge which the pupil has gained or the judgments he has formed. It serves as a check on his forgetting useful items of knowledge and ideas. The habit of making notes of what is read and of summarizing helps the recollection of what has been studied. Besides, writing is one of the four linguistic objectives of teaching a language. Therefore, the teacher must be acquainted with how to teach writing English with comprehension.

Writing is a difficult art which requires complete control of the muscles of hand and wrist that a small child does not naturally possess. That's why it involves:

- ✓ Teaching to develop the skill of controlling the small muscles of the fingers and the wrist, while writing.
- ✓ Teaching coordination of hand and eye.
- ✓ Getting students do various exercises in written work.
- ✓ Legibility, attractiveness, uniformity, distinctiveness, good styled, speedy, correctly spaced writing is called a Good Writing.
- ✓ Kindergarten method, Tracing method, Free Imitation Method are some basic methods of writing.

Writing is an individual effort. Individuals compose their thoughts often in privacy and then reduce their thoughts to writing, using the strict conventions followed in the language. Though writing is an individual effort, it must follow the rules laid down. The acquisition of oral speech by itself is the comprehension of signs (symbols). In writing, the discrete nature of linguistic signs should be appreciated consciously. The learner must comprehend and recognize the sound structure of each word, dissect it and reproduce it in alphabetical symbols, which he must have studied and memorized before. Modern world demand some efficiency in writing skills. However, when one can learn to speak the first or second language with little or no conscious thought, switch from the spoken to writing poses greater difficulty. Writing needs the potential to help consolidate and improve the students' speaking and reading skills. Reading involves seeing and pronouncing, writing involves association of sounds with comprehensive composition of thoughts and their orderly presentation and hand movements.

The following measures can be applied to improve comprehensible handwriting:

- i) Use of four-lined note-books.
- ii) Sitting in a proper posture.
- iii) Having the proper position desks.
- iv) Using calligraphy note-books.
- v) Arranging competitions.
- vi) Showing model handwriting.
- vii) Checking mistakes.
- viii) Holding the pen properly.
- ix) Using black-board for new words.
- x) Motivating pupils to find their own mistakes.

In this way all the above mentioned skills can be taught with acute

comprehension if the teacher devotes himself with overall preparation for his students' perfection in all the skills. The teacher is always a role model for the students before him. They see their ideal in him. If he keeps all the suggestions, he can surely improve his students. A teacher should know what his task is and what he is trying to achieve by teaching English. A teacher without the knowledge of aims and objectives is like a ship which has no harbour to reach. The determination of aims will enable the teacher to decide the method and devices which he will use to accomplish the task he has set before him. Only he himself has to know the aims and objectives of teaching English in order to teach properly and efficiently. He has also to tell them to the children because without knowing them, their learning will be half-hearted.



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