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# IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS IN CLIL (CONTENT AND LANGAUGE INTEGRATED) CLASSES

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**ANNOTATION:** Listening, like reading, writing, and speaking, is a complex process best developed by consistent practice. Listening is the vital skill providing the basis for the successful communication and successful professional career. Effective listening skills enhance the ability to learn and adapt new information, knowledge, and skills. Listening comprehension is more than extracting meaning from incoming speech. It is a process of matching speech with the background knowledge, i.e. what the listeners already know about the subject.

**KEY WORDS:** Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), listening skills; cognitive skills; learning strategies.

## INTRODUCTION

Listening is a language skill, thus it can be developed through practice. In Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) it is important that students are provided with the suitable materials to listen to. These materials come in a variety of forms, first as a teacher‟s input, as well as peer input and interaction and as information source (recorded lectures, films, tutorials, etc). In language classes an audio-lingual method was considered to be very important for students to develop a better pronunciation, to train comprehension skills. Vandergrift (2002) points out that in the early 70‟s, work by Asher, Postovsky, Winitz and, later, Krashen, emphasized the role of listening as a tool for understanding and central to the process of language learning. The aim of this paper is to analyse how CLIL methodology could be useful in developing listening comprehension in both content and language classes. Research findings are based on the materials produced by the international team of a Socrates Lingua 2 project - “Language in Content Instruction” (LICI) which was carried out during 2006- 2009 and has involved 8 partners coming from 7 European countries. The focus of the LICI project and its products was the language of learning and instruction in a CLIL environment. The Language In Content Instruction (LICI) model emphasizes the role of language resources in encoding content-specific meaning. Language and meaning are integrated, and by extending language, meaning resources extend accordingly. The language focus consists of the training of language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), vocabulary and grammar. For linking content with language, general and content-specific thinking skills and strategies are analysed. This paper focuses on the analysis of theoretical issues as well as practical examples illustrating how it might be possible to select and use different strategies in order to develop listening skills in a CLIL environment.

Larry Vandergrift (1999) emphasizes that listening is a complex, active process of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know. Two distinct processes characterize listening comprehension. When learners rely on prior knowledge in order to understand the meaning of a message, they are using „top-down‟ processes. Prior knowledge includes the knowledge of the topic, familiarity with the discipline, awareness of the listening context, the text-type, the culture or other information held in long-term memory. Top-down processing refers to how we use our world knowledge to attribute meaning to language input; how our knowledge of social convention helps us understand meaning. It involves “the listener‟s ability to bring prior information to bear on the task of understanding the “heard” language” (Morley, 2001). „Bottom-up‟ processes are also used by learners when they rely on specific

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components of the L2 for aural comprehension. Meaning is constructed from morphemes to words to grammatical relationships to lexical meanings until, eventually, the message is decoded. "Bottom-up refers to that part of the aural comprehension process in which the understanding of the "heard" language is worked out proceeding from sounds to words to grammatical relationships in lexical meanings" (Morley, 2001). Listening comprehension, according to Vandergrift (2002), is an interactive, interpretive process where listeners use both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding messages. In other words, both „top-down" and „bottom-up" processes are at work in the listening activity. It is a continuum where learners will lean towards one process or the other depending on their knowledge of the language, the topic or the listening objectives. If objectives are established before the listening task, learners have a purpose. They can 90 become selective and decide which of the two processes will be activated. Some of the earliest theoretical developments in the listening field, as outlined by Kelly Congdon (2008), involved distinguishing between serious and social listening, as well as separating critical and evaluative listening from that centered on empathy with the speaker or comprehension of the speaker's message from the speaker's perspective. Although disagreement persists over the inclusion of this or that particular type and scholars continue to employ a number of different, overlapping names to connote slightly different types of listening, a general consensus exists that listening can be divided, according to listener purpose, into the following types: discriminative, critical (or evaluative), appreciative, therapeutic (or empathic), and self-listening. Evelyn Pitre (2007) distinguishes between three types of listening: content listening, critical listening and emphatic listening. According to the author, the skills involved in content listening are threefold: identifying the key points; asking clarification questions and verifying content. For critical listening one needs to be able to listen for and test the content; evaluate the logic of the argument, the strength of the evidence, the validity of the conclusions, the implication of the message, the agenda of the speaker, etc. Empathic listening involves the following skills: ability to ask open questions; keep the speaker going; reflect on the content. Another conceptual tool is suggested by Lyman Steil. Known as the S.I.E.R. model, each letter of the acronym stands for a phase in the listening process: Sensing the message, Interpreting (or understanding the message), Evaluating the message, and Responding to the message (Steil, Barker & Watson, 1983). One notable element missing in the S.I.E.R. model is remembering (memory/ retention) which plays an obviously crucial role in listening. Interpreting could arguably be understood as including retention but primarily means recreating the message in order to understand and give meaning to it. Process models, one of which is S.E.I.R., can serve as useful conceptual schemas for organizing and understanding the inter-relations between the various component skills involved in listening. O"Malley and Chamot (1994) propose an educational model, the CALLA model, which incorporates modern pedagogical principles, academic content- and task-based language learning combined with explicit learning strategies instruction. The authors distinguish between 5 phases of strategy use in a model lesson: preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion. Robbins (2000) suggests the following stages of a strategic listening comprehension task: Before listening - setting a goal, planning, activating background knowledge, predicting. While listening - selective attention, inferring, imagery. After listening - clarifying, summarization, elaboration, personalization, checking the goal, evaluation. Teachers can sensitize their audience by making their learners aware of useful listening strategies. Thus, listening becomes an active skill developed through awareness of and repeated application of listening strategies Thus we see that there are lots of theoretical models developed, the goal of which is to enhance listening skills. Still, the overall achievement depends very much on the successful process of learning where learners and teachers find the best practices in order to achieve these goals. How to teach listening? It is important in teaching listening to make the students aware of how to choose and practice the strategies that help to achieve good results. Pre-listening activities help the learners to make

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decisions what to listen for and to put the emphasis on the content meaning while listening. First, students need to activate their knowledge of the topic, second, a purpose for listening combined with specific listening tasks must be established. Thus the students are encouraged to look for the specific information they need to listen for and the degree of detail required. Using all the available information, students can make predictions to anticipate what they might hear. A CLIL teacher should constantly provide the students with language scaffolding. Repetition, rephrasing, use of synonyms and antonyms, circumlocution, questions, elicitation and oral feedback are some examples of oral language support. Some examples of visual scaffolding are pictures, maps, charts, tables and other graphic organizers that help the listener to structure the information that one is listening to and pay attention to the key content. For advanced learners, who are listening to lectures, the listening material can be scaffolded by more complex forms of visuals, such as Tlists or Venn Diagrams, etc. The use and complexity of visuals depends on the age, level of language proficiency of the learners and the complexity of the content under study. Among the basic principles of effective listening, emphasized by Kelly Congdon (2008), one could mention the importance of active attention. Listening involves mental activity, including cognitive and affective processing of received information.

Consequently, educators enhance listening competence through diligent focus on the mental processes and skills involved in perceptive listening, such as memory, sense making, and evaluation. Listening is a variable communication activity that differs according to the purpose and nature of the listener and the speaker, the content and style of the message, the channel of communication, and the surrounding environment.

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