



REVISTA INCLUSIONES

HOMENAJE A ROSA MARÍA VALLES RUIZ

Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales

Volumen 7 . Número Especial

Abril / Junio

2020

ISSN 0719-4706

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PECULIARITIES OF TEACHING COMPREHENSIVE LISTENING TO DIGITAL STUDENTS

Ph. D. Inna V. Borisova

Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Russia

Moscow City University, Russia

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5027-6484

borisova.i.v@inbox.ru

Ph. D. Natalya N. Balabas

Moscow University for Industry and Finance “Synergy”, Russia

People’s Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Russia

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2572-5684

balnani@mail.ru

Fecha de Recepción: 03 de enero de 2020 – **Fecha Revisión:** 16 de febrero de 2020

Fecha de Aceptación: 11 de marzo de 2020 – **Fecha de Publicación:** 01 de abril de 2020

Abstract

This article deals with searching for effective ways of developing Bachelor and Master students’ listening skills in conditions of all-round digitalization of the human society. Relying on traditional approaches to teaching comprehensive listening, the authors develop some original postulates helping them remove the barriers hindering this process. The presented research is relevant due to the introduction of new educational standards adopted in Russia after its joining the Bologna process. The creation of the unified educational space and the country’s inclusion into the globalization process demand such transferable skills as intercultural sensitivity, managing uncertainty, the ability of adjusting communication to local styles and building relationships between people from different cultures. To be competitive in their academic and professional fields, students should get aligned with all these changes and demands. Keeping this in view, the authors try to customize the teaching-learning process to the peculiarities of young people who cannot do without different gadgets involving them in virtual reality and dictating them the corresponding way of thinking. The article is supplemented with charts and graphs demonstrating the intermediate results obtained by the researchers. However, they stress the fact that the society digitalization is still going on, and today’s teachers are not just third-party observers, but rather direct participants of the processes under investigation. That is why, registering some positive shifts, one can hardly draw unambiguous conclusions at this stage of research.

Keywords

Bologna process – Higher school – Foreign languages – Competitiveness – Digitalization

Para Citar este Artículo:

Borisova, Inna V. y Balabas, Natalya N. Peculiarities of teaching comprehensive listening to digital students. Revista Inclusiones Vol: 7 num Especial (2020): 85-99.

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Introduction

Modern life is very dynamic, mobile and rich in all sorts of changes. If a person is not able to get aligned with these changes they will not be competitive. Lack of competitiveness negatively affects all spheres of a person's life causing mental and physical problems. Virtual reality, or rather digital discourse, makes humans follow technological game rules. As people today have a continuous Internet access, they can monitor others' failures and success, which sometimes exacerbate the state of affairs. It is especially relevant for young people because of their emotional fluctuations and lack of critical thinking, life and professional experience.

Contemporary education is aimed not only at equipping young people with academic knowledge and professional competencies but also at arming them with effective techniques of surviving in the ever-changing world. That is why education undergoes constant changes and improvements. The reform of higher education, due to Russia's entry into the Bologna process, presupposes "humanistic character of education, priority of life and health, rights and freedoms, free development of personality, upbringing of respect, hard work, citizenship, patriotism, responsibility, legal culture, respect for nature and the environment, environmental management"¹.

Much attention is also paid to international academic collaboration, which is exercised through "referral of students <...> to foreign educational organizations, which includes the provision of special scholarships for students to study abroad <...>, within the framework of international academic exchange"². So, students' mobility can be considered as one of the powerful drivers for creating a unified educational and scientific space, which urgently demands high level of foreign languages knowledge. This article is devoted to one of the most challenging aspects in studying foreign languages – listening comprehension. The authors' aim is to reveal the techniques of increasing effectiveness of this process for digital students – those who live and study in the era of getting and digesting information in its digital form, those who cannot do without different gadgets involving them in virtual reality and dictating them the corresponding way of thinking.

The topicality of the present research is also conditioned by the fact that it is digitalization in implementing Federal State Educational Standards that aims at educational environment transformation, the sort of transformation that means "a set of social, cultural, and specially organized psycho-pedagogical conditions in the educational organization, whose interaction with an individual results in forging their personality"³.

Materials and methods

At the initial stage of their research, the authors studied the theoretical materials available on the topic. Being a valuable source of information, these materials also became the starting point for the authors' further speculations on the problem and a certain guide for selecting the necessary methods and techniques in searching for

¹ The Law on Education in the Russian Federation. Federal Law N 273-FZ. December 29, 2012.

² The Law on Education in the Russian Federation. Federal Law N 273-FZ. December 29, 2012.

³ A.L. Tretyakov. Digitalization of the educational environment in the conditions of implementing the Federal State Educational Standards. Information and communication technologies in the modern educational space. Collection of articles based on the materials of the all-Russian scientific and practical seminar. Moscow, 2018. 154–159.

practical proofs of their hypotheses. Different views on the facts and processes under study helped the authors thoroughly interpret the data obtained and draw the original conclusions.

The basics of listening theory were developed in scientific and methodological works of such researchers as: I.A. Zimnyaya⁴, A.R. Luria⁵, N.V. Yelukhina⁶, I.I. Khaleeva⁷, Y.M. Kolker and E.S. Ustinova⁸, N.D. Galskova and N.I. Gez⁹, G. Brown¹⁰, P. Ur¹¹, A. Anderson and T. Lynch¹², M. Underwood¹³, D. Nunan¹⁴, J.C. Richards¹⁵, M. Rost¹⁶ and others.

The methods applied by the authors in the practical part of their research can be divided into

- those presupposing direct contact with students (observing local experiments, surveys);
- those demanding analytical and critical thinking skills (comparing, summarizing and classifying the statistical data obtained).

To make the results of their research more tangible the authors presented the accumulated information in the form of charts and graphs.

Results

The presented research was conducted on the basis of non-linguistic faculties of four Russian Universities, namely: Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation (Financial University), People's Friendship University of Russia (RUDN), Moscow City University (MCU), and Moscow University for Industry and Finance "Synergy" ("Synergy"). The total respondents' number equals 384; 265 of them being first- and second-year Bachelor students (Bachelors) and 119 – first-year Master students (Masters). The corresponding shares are reflected in the following diagram:

⁴ I. A. Zimnyaya, *Semantic perception of a speech message (in terms of mass communication)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976).

⁵ A. R. Luria, *Basic problems of neuro-linguistics* (Moscow: Publishing house of Moscow State University, 1976).

⁶ N. V. Yelukhina, "Learning to listen in line with a communicative-oriented methodology", *Foreign languages in school num 2* (1989): 28–36.

⁷ I. I. Khaleeva, *Fundamentals of the theory of learning to understand foreign language speech (training of translators)* (Moscow: Higher school, 1989).

⁸ Ya. M. Kolker y E. S. Ustinova, *Learning to listen to English speech* (Moscow: Academia, 2002).

⁹ N. D. Galskova y N. D. Gez, *The theory of foreign language teaching: Linguodidactics and methodology* (Moscow: Academy, 2006).

¹⁰ G. Brown, *Listening to spoken English* (London: Longman, 1977).

¹¹ P. Ur, *Teaching listening comprehension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹² A. Anderson y T. Lynch, *Listening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹³ M. Underwood, *Teaching Listening* (London, 1989).

¹⁴ D. Nunan, *Language teaching methodology: A textbook for teachers* (London: Prentice Hall, 1991).

¹⁵ J. C. Richards, *Teaching listening and speaking: From theory to practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ M. Rost, *Teaching and researching listening. Second edition* (Harlow: Longman, 2011).

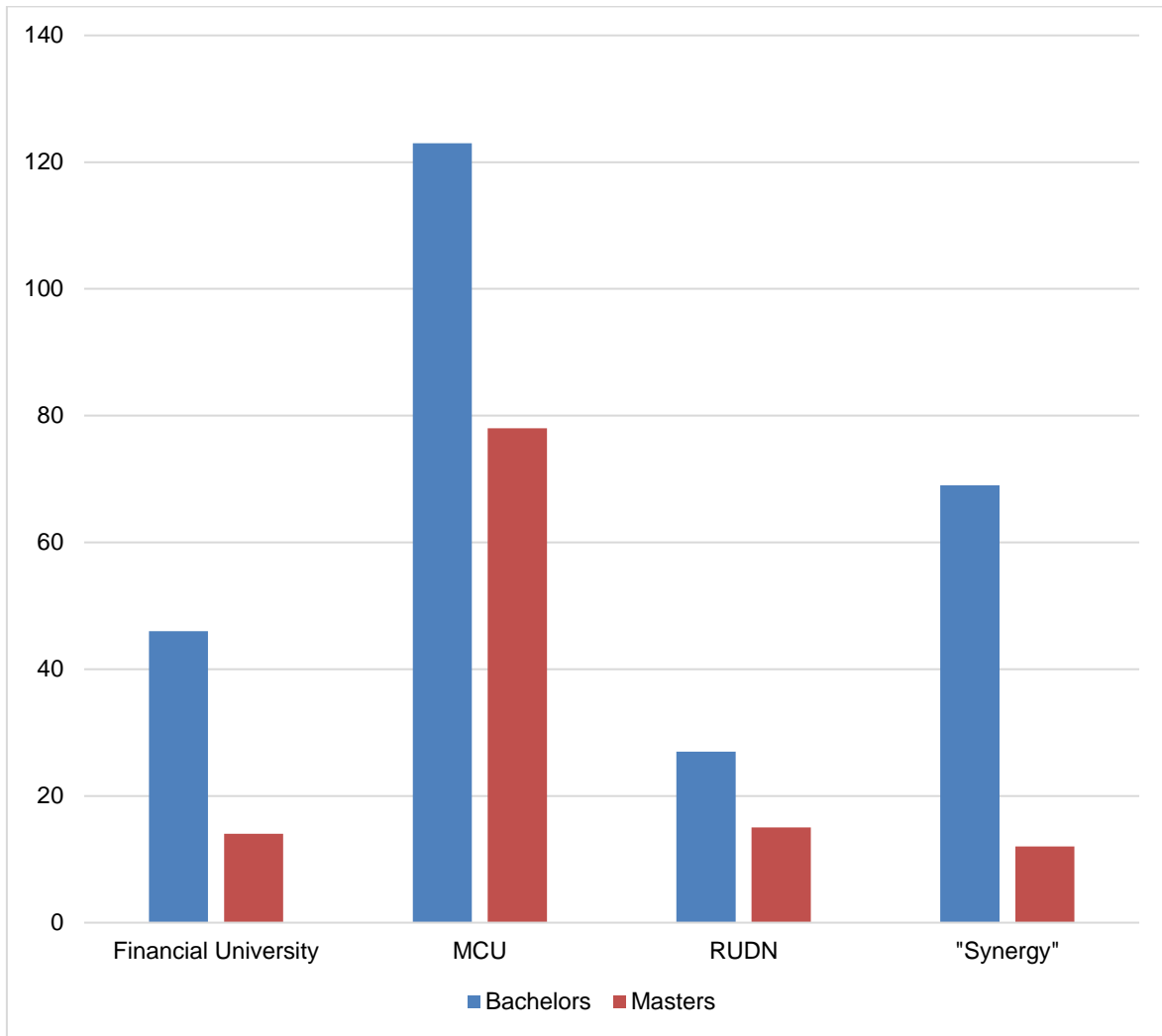


Figure 1
Students' levels and affiliations

The period under investigation embraced the academic year 2018/19 and the first term of the academic year 2019/20. At the initial stage, the students were to answer the question: "What factor prevents you most from perfect comprehensive listening?" Their choices were distributed in the following way:

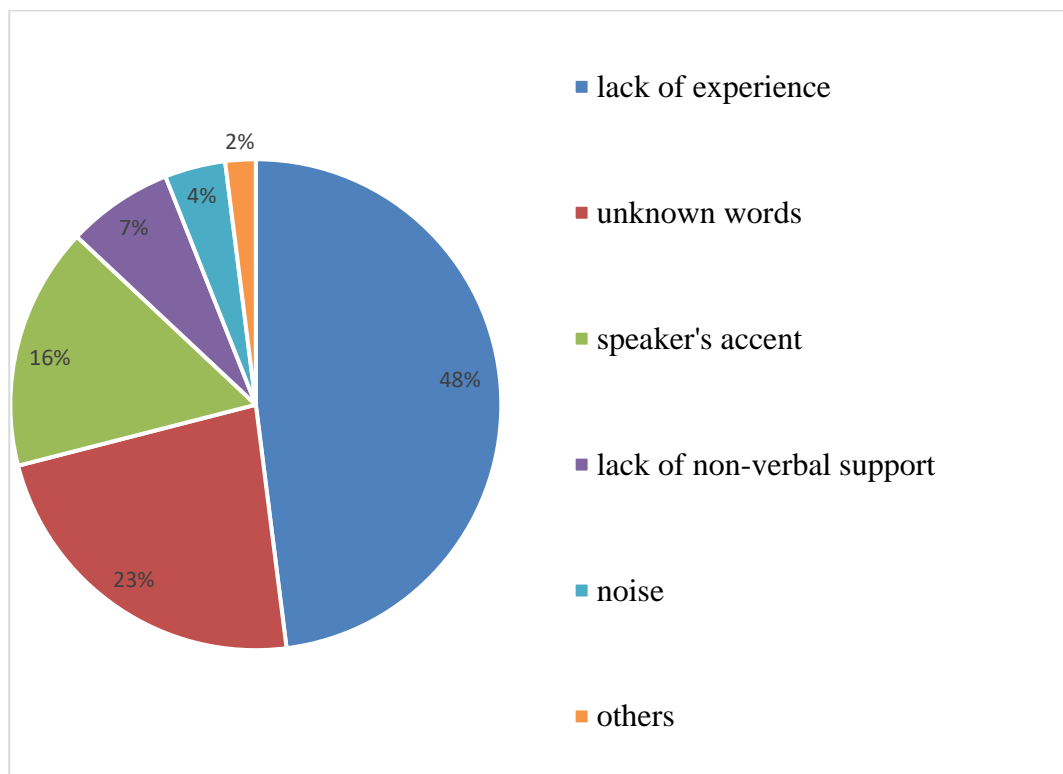


Figure 2
Factors hindering comprehension process

Taking into consideration these factors, the authors attempted to tailor the teaching-learning process to their students' needs relying on the qualities inherent to the digitals. As a result, they developed some postulates that eventually were proven to be potent.

If possible, present the text only once. It should be noted that in real life, a person often participates in a dialogue, which implies the ability to hear, understand the interlocutor and respond adequately to their speech within a very short period of time. As a rule, a listener perceives speech that is presented only once. The fulminant pace of today's life does not give a person the second chance: if you are not as fast as your competitors are, you are a loser. Exactly because of that, when studying a foreign language, it is necessary to train students to comprehend foreign language speech after the first listening and teach them to concentrate their attention only on the most important facts.

Shorten the list of unknown words to minimum. As one can see from the pie chart above, one of the challenges for students is unknown words. In the traditional approach, this obstacle was removed by giving the list of unknown words at the pre-listening stage. We presume that today it is no use giving students long lists of words to catch or, even more, to learn by heart – it is beyond their understanding: in conditions of digital culture, they have a certain “protective shield”. They are used to imagining their world in the “artificial intellect” format: their brain is a computer and no matter how powerful the computer is, its storage is limited. The same is about our brain: if all its cells are full, will it be able in case of emergency to input the information that will be really vital? This protective mechanism seems to be built-in in the digitals' brains. Such phenomenon is a

flipside of overall computerization: we begin functioning in a machine mode. Nobody knows if it is good or bad – it is our reality, and we are insiders of this process. All that a teacher can do is to customize the educational process to their students and try to do it carefully, on a scientific basis, not violating moral norms and values.

Do not prohibit your students to use their smartphones and other gadgets. You will never find a student today who has no gadget. For them it is a must. Does prohibition make any sense? (The situation certainly may vary for linguistic students.)

Rely mostly on the extracts from real (not academic) sources. Today at most Universities, teachers use authentic textbooks that are provided with audio support. No doubt, such audio materials are of great help and their value could hardly be overestimated. But we strongly recommend teachers to use the latest authentic materials from the Internet: a piece of news, a video blog session, a part of an interview, etc. It really works because such materials are relevant, they touch upon the burning problems of the day and “press your students’ sensitive buttons”. For example, it is useful to listen to community-based radio that is vitally important to Native Americans in the United States. These radio stations broadcast programs that meet the diverse needs of the communities they serve, such as news about tribal politics, educational programming, programming related to health and other vital aspects of daily living, and perhaps most importantly, programming that seeks to preserve and perpetuate indigenous languages, histories, cultures and values¹⁷.

Select texts with live youth language. Do not underestimate young people. Alongside with discussing everyday situations, they quite often deal with serious problems. They are interested in the same social, political, cultural and other contemporary problems as older people do, but they speak about them in a specific manner. Let your students get the topical information “in their own language” (at least at some lessons), they will really appreciate it.

Listen to non-native speakers from different parts of the globe. In our world, with its leading trends of integration and globalization, it is extremely important to be ready for working across cultures. To be competitive, your students will need intercultural sensitivity, managing uncertainty, the ability of adjusting their communication to some local style and building relationships between people from different cultures. These are the transferable skills that will always be in demand for successful academic and professional mobility. Let your students enjoy all the diversity of pronunciation manners. Remember that listening to recordings is fundamentally different from the listening experience in a real geographically situated place; knowing and exploring these differences could lead to new techniques of listening¹⁸.

Vary the duration range of the texts. Life is very changeable today: people change countries, careers, accommodations, lifestyles, etc. Nobody knows in what situation your students will have to use their listening skills: attending a serious lecture of a renowned professor or chatting with a roommate in a dormitory. Prepare your students for everything: life will make its choice.

¹⁷ D. Smiles, “Listening to native radio”, International Journal of Listening Vol: 33 num 3 (2019): 142–147.

¹⁸ A. Uetz, “Notes toward a methodology for listening in place: Hong Kong”, International Journal of Listening Vol: 33 num 3 (2019): 138–141.

Switch your students' attention to different topics. Remember that the digitals possess not linear, but hypertext thinking. Something that seems illogical and chaotic for the older generations is natural and obvious for them. The more quickly they respond to changes the more successful they are in today's multitasking environment.

Encourage students to listen texts on their professional topics. It is especially important for Master students. Some of them will later become Doctoral students and they are sure to highly appreciate your effort, and the experience gained.

Be consistent: practise comprehensive listening at every lesson. As one can see on the above pie chart, the greatest challenge for students is lack of listening experience. Even if a person has a strong motivation for mastering the language, it is difficult for them to find time, conditions, and (which is the most significant factor) will power to make themselves listen to foreign texts regularly. Fill in this gap. Remember that "water wears away the stone". Teachers are humans, too. And sometimes the same factors prevent them from finding and carefully selecting fresh materials for comprehensive listening and making up the appropriate tasks. But at the end of your course you will see that this activity is very rewarding and it is worth of your time and effort.

Be tactful, flexible, patient and understanding. Adjust your way of thinking to that of your digital students, try "to walk in their shoes". Appreciate the slightest signs of students' success: do not forget to praise your students and encourage them to go further. Do not compare your own experience with theirs. There is no greater folly than comparing the past and the present. Being conservative is a great thing, being open-minded is a much greater one.

It should be highlighted that some of the statements presented above could seem disputable and even controversial. Nevertheless, on their way to further investigations, the authors have obtained some inspiring intermediate results. At the end of the course, the respondents were offered an open question: "What has changed in your process of comprehensive listening?" The answers were as follows:

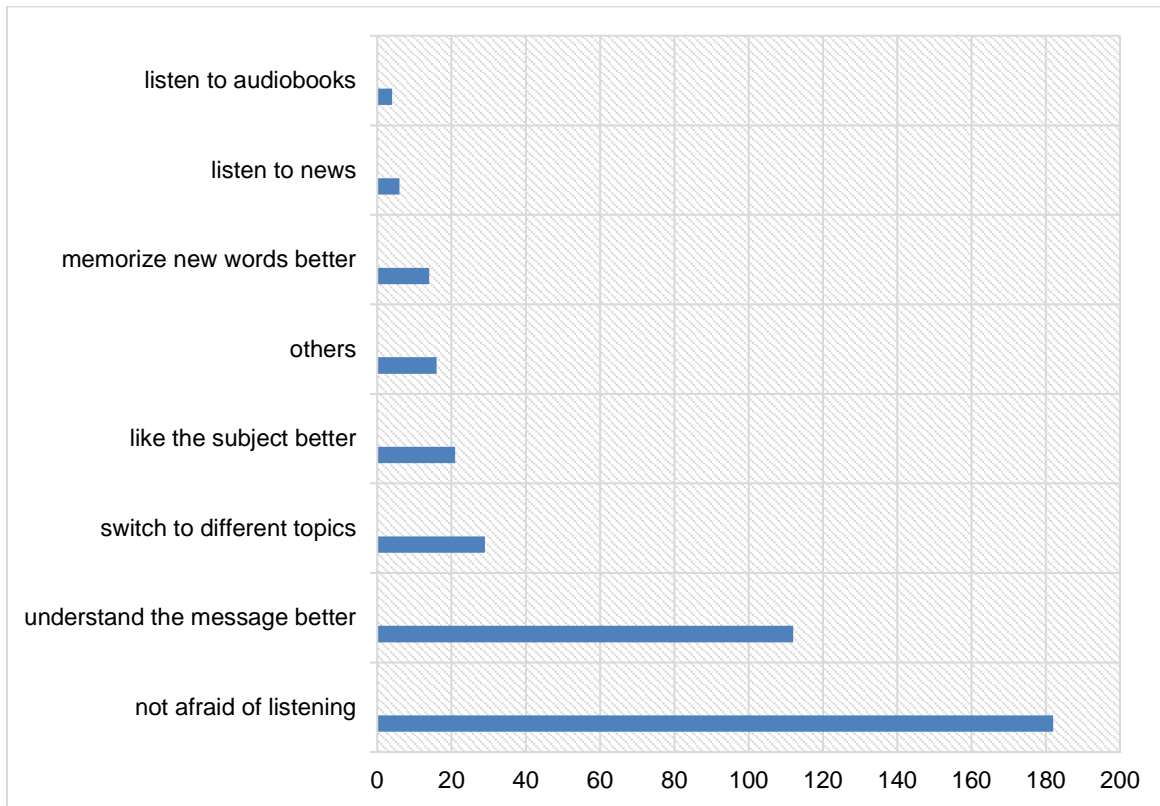


Figure 3
Changes in comprehensive listening

Discussion

The Internet's consequences for modern society are radical, because it creates an effectively infinite reserve for human action¹⁹. Increasing availability of data can be characterized in a number of dimensions or V's: volume, which describes the vast amount of data that are constantly generated in our digitized world; velocity, which corresponds to the speed at which data are created, especially in real-time applications; and variety, which describes the different forms of generated data such as text, images, voice and geospatial data^{20,21,22}. Educational data is no exception. New educational environments, technologies and regulations are being designed to further enrich the types of information made available to institutions²³. Higher education is, like nearly every sector, undergoing a period of change influenced by digital, networked technologies, as well as broader social and economic shifts. As a consequence, higher education institutions seek to harness new

¹⁹ N. Couldry, *Media, society, world. Social theory and digital media practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

²⁰ G. Firican, "The 10 Vs of big data", *Upside* num 2 (2017). Available at: <https://tdwi.org/articles/2017/02/08/10-vs-of-big-data.aspx>

²¹ K. H. Kyritsi, "The pursuit of patterns in educational data mining as a threat to student privacy", *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* num 1 (2019): 1–10.

²² P. Long y G. Siemens, "Penetrating the fog: analytics in learning and education", *Educause Review* Vol: 46 num 5 (2011): 31–40.

²³ M. E. Gursoy; A. Inan; M. E. Nergiz y Y. Saygin, "Privacy-preserving learning analytics: challenges and techniques", *IEEE Transactions on Learning Technologies* Vol: 10 num 1 (2017): 68–81.

technologies to better serve current students and also to reach new student populations²⁴. The majority of higher education institutions across the world are currently in the process of experimenting with digitalization and applying new technologies to certain parts of their operation. The analysis reveals that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to the implementation of technology for flexibility and openness²⁵.

The situation described cannot but influence the teaching-learning process at all University levels. Educators attempt to revise traditional approaches to meet the demands of students living in the digital environment. Teachers of foreign languages are deeply concerned with searching for tools and techniques that can facilitate the process of mastering a language in this dynamic environment. It is obvious that speaking a foreign language is not possible without the control of listening, since listening, along with speaking, provides the opportunity to communicate in a certain context²⁶. Listening is a critical communication skill and therefore an essential element of management education.

As the problems of teaching listening have been constantly arousing a great interest of Russian and foreign pedagogues, it is not surprising that there is no consensus on the definition of listening process. In this research, the authors rely on the following definition of listening: "a complex active process of speech-making activity that requires detailed study both in terms of the functioning of perception mechanisms and the development of listening skills"²⁷. Comprehensive listening is "listening focused on understanding and remembering important information from a <...> speaking message"²⁸. Comprehensive listening is sure to be an active type of listening that involves restating a paraphrased version of the speaker's message, asking questions when appropriate, and maintaining moderate to high nonverbal conversational involvement²⁹. Practitioners and researchers from fields such as social work³⁰, nursing³¹, education³², physician-patient communication³³, leadership³⁴, public administration³⁵, sales³⁶, and crisis negotiation³⁷,

²⁴ D. Dohmen, Higher education funding in the context of competing demands for government expenditure. Handbook on the Politics of Higher Education. Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar. 2018. 229–247.

²⁵ D. Orr, "How is digitalization affecting the flexibility and openness of higher education provision? Results of a global survey using a new conceptual model", Journal of Interactive Media in Education num 1 (2019): 1–12.

²⁶ N. N. Balabas, "Key aspects of teaching foreign speech listening", Azimuth of Scientific Research: Pedagogy and Psychology Vol: 7 num 2 (2018): 36–39.

²⁷ S. V. Govorun, Development of listening skills and abilities of Oriental students studying English: Diss. Cand. ped. sciences (Saint Petersburg, 2015).

²⁸ B. Tucker y K. Barton, Exploring public speaking. Second Edition (Galileo: University System of Georgia, 2016).

²⁹ H. Jr. Weger; G. C. Bell; E. M. Minei y M. C. Robinson, "The relative effectiveness of active listening in initial interactions", International Journal of Listening Vol: 28 num 1 (2014): 13–31.

³⁰ A. Rogers y B. Welch, "Using standardized clients in the classroom: An evaluation of a training module to teach active listening skills to social work students", Journal of Teaching in Social Work num 29 (2009): 153–168.

³¹ L. Bryant, "The art of active listening", Practice Nurse Vol: 37 num 6 (2009): 49–52.

³² D. McNaughton; D. Hamlin; J. McCarthy; D. Head-Reeves y M. Schreiner, "Learning to listen: Teaching an active listening strategy to pre-service education professionals", Topics in Early Childhood Special Education num 27 (2007): 223–231.

³³ T. Fassaert; S. van Dulmen; F. Schellevis y J. Bensing, "Active listening in medical consultations", Patient Education & Counseling, num 68 (2007) 258–264.

³⁴ M. H. Hoppe, "Lending an ear: Why leaders must learn to listen actively", Leadership in Action num 27 (2007): 11–14.

specifically identify active listening as an important communication skill. Active listening surpasses passive listening or simple hearing to establish a deeper connection between speaker and listener, as the listener gives the speaker full attention via inquiry, reflection, respect, and empathy³⁸.

To achieve tangible results in any educational aspect, a teacher should take into consideration the peculiarities of their particular audience in the classroom. In the modern society, “the bombardment of visual aids, such as television images, commercials, billboards, posters, computer icons, cell phone smiley pictures, has such an effect that people are becoming less susceptible to the printed word; students cannot focus on the text for a long time if there are no pictures, diagrams, graphs or charts in it”³⁹. They may be characterized by such traits as “multitasking, clip thinking, active interpersonal interaction through social networks, the desire to make a personal contribution to the creation and development of the world around us, dependence <...> on various digital and mobile devices”⁴⁰.

The Russian psychologist T.V. Semenovskikh defines clip thinking as “the process of reflecting many different properties of objects without taking into account the connections between them, characterized by fragmentary information flow, illogicality, complete heterogeneity of incoming information, high speed of switching between parts, fragments of information, lack of a complete picture of the perception of the surrounding world”⁴¹. According to the latest research, the duration of digital students’ attention has been reduced to 8 seconds; the term “eight-second filters” has appeared to refer to this phenomenon, which are necessary in order to “evaluate and sift through huge amounts of information”⁴². The virtual world, which seems artificial, incomprehensible, and sometimes hostile to the older generation, displaces for the younger generation the real world, on which the traditional education system was focused⁴³.

If we try to project these features of digital students on their academic style in general, we will be able to formulate some principles basic for their learning approach:

³⁵ D. Stein, “Reducing audience aggression by reflecting back”, *Public Management*, num 91 (2009): 34.

³⁶ J. Boe, “How to build trust & rapport quickly”, *American Salesman*, Vol: 53 num 10 (2008): 15–18.

³⁷ T. Royce, “The negotiator and the bomber: Analyzing the critical role of active listening in crisis negotiations”, *Negotiation Journal* num 21 (2005): 5–27.

³⁸ S. E. Spataro y J. Bloch, “Can you repeat that? Teaching active listening in management education”, *Journal of Management Education* Vol: 42 num 2 (2017): 168–198.

³⁹ E. A. Makarova y E. L. Makarova, “The functional model of using visualization and digitalization for media literacy development in media education process”, *Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)* Vol: 59 num 4 (2019): 547–556.

⁴⁰ T. A. Makarova, “Content of education for generation Z: what it should be”, *Values and meanings* num 3 Vol: 37 (2015): 116–120.

⁴¹ T. V. Semenovskikh, “Clip thinking” – a phenomenon of modernity. Optimal communications (OK): Epistemic resource of The Academy of Media Industry and The Department of Theory and Practice of Public Connectivity of RGGU. Available at: <http://jarki.ru/wpress/2013/02/18/3208/>

⁴² Ye Kirillova, Generation Z and its place in history. The theory of generations. Generation X, Y, and Z. Available at: <https://fb.ru/article/210221/pokolenie-z-i-ego-mesto-v-istorii-teoriya-pokoleniy-pokoleniya-x-y-i-z>

⁴³ I. V. Borisova, “The peculiarities of “teacher – students” interaction under audiovisual priorities of the youth environment (on the example of the subject “Foreign Language”)”. *Proceedings of the Southern Federal University. Philological Sciences* num 3 (2018): 213–221.

- information can always be found in the Internet, so there is no need to remember it;
- before you create something new yourself, you need to search the Internet for something similar that was previously created;
- for catching the necessary information, podcasts, soundtracks, images, and videos are preferred to hard copies;
- it is better to express the idea in short sentences or even phrases, without any unnecessary embellishment;
- to be understood, it is desirable to communicate using jargon developed by the Internet virtual community⁴⁴.

As far as listening is concerned, the representatives of the digital generation do not have the listening power their predecessors used to. Perhaps they do not need it, or due to neuroplasticity, i.e. “having a brain that adapts to experience”⁴⁵, their brains have adapted to other means of efficiently taking in information.

In the light of all the above-mentioned, we may argue that, though comprehensive listening remains one of the key aspects in teaching foreign languages at higher school, the traditional approach should be revised and supplemented with some new elements relevant to contemporary students’ perception. It is especially urgent because Common European Framework of Reference imposes high requirements on students in terms of listening skills: students of non-linguistic faculties should understand lectures, if the topic is familiar, and understand most radio and television programs; students of linguistic faculties should understand spontaneous speech, idiomatic expressions, lectures and presentations related to professional activities and studies, even if they are difficult in their content and language aspects⁴⁶.

Conclusions

As we can see, comprehensive listening, being an integral part of learning a foreign language, has always been one of the most challenging aspects for both teachers and students. As a separate stage of a lesson, it can be a goal, but in a broader sense, it serves as a means of improving other linguistic aspects. If students are able to catch their interlocutors’ messages they will be apt to use the grasped information in the process of performing different tasks, improving their speaking, reading and writing skills.

It should be repeatedly emphasized that developing students’ ability to perceive foreign language by ear will be effective only if this activity is practiced on a regular basis. Constant drilling will keep them always “on guard”, i.e. involved in a foreign language environment and ready for real communication with both native and non-native speakers. This skill can be hardly overestimated, because in the process of learning a foreign language and acquainting with foreign cultural and historical phenomena, the ability to

⁴⁴ Generation Z: how to teach them? Available at: <http://intensiv-center.livejournal.com/70034.html>

⁴⁵ Definition.org. Available at: <http://definition.org/define/neuroplasticity/>

⁴⁶ European system of foreign language proficiency levels. Available at: https://mipt.ru/education/chair/foreign_languages/articles/european_levels

dialogue and empathy is developed. And this is just as important as the acquisition of fundamental scientific knowledge. A foreign language becomes one of the effective tools that help future specialists navigate the flow of constantly changing information, think independently and creatively.

In teaching comprehensive listening to digital students, we should take into account their distinctions from the previous generation and customize the teaching process to their way of getting, digesting, and accumulating information. The society digitalization is still going on, and we should realize that, living today, we, teachers, are not just third-party observers, but rather direct participants of the processes under investigation. That is why we can hardly draw unambiguous conclusions about their positive or negative impacts on the humanity development as a whole. We can only state individual manifestations of these processes and project their influence on the educational sphere at this historical moment. Generally speaking, the situation of a researcher in any branch of modern science, including the methodology of teaching foreign languages, is such that, having comprehended one innovation, whether it is a new phenomenon or a new aspect of the relationship between a teacher and students, we immediately must meet the following changes and develop new research tools.

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