

## Assisting L2 Students in the ESP Classrooms with Specialised Vocabulary Acquisition Skills

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### Brief Bio Statement

*I hold masters in English Language and Literature from the University of Kerala , India and masters in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages from the University of Sheffield Hallam , UK . I have 19 years experience in teaching ESP and EAP. Taught linguistics and literature at the University of Kerala and after that taught ESP in Botswana Institute of Administration and commerce, the national public training institute and at the University of Botswana . I am currently teaching ESP at Algonquin College Ottawa, Canada. My interests are in developing teaching methodologies that will make the ESP classrooms interesting for the learners and the teachers.*

### Abstract

Mastering vocabulary that is specific to their field is a challenge for L2 learners in professional programs and this often affects their performance in the core area of study and interactions in future job situations. Through effective listening skills and the use of contextual and schematic knowledge learners will be able to improve their vocabulary acquisition and recall skills. This paper, supported by research data, aims to clarify how this could be achieved in the ESP classrooms.

### Introduction

In the language learning needs of the L2 students an aspect that needs constant attention is developing their vocabulary acquisition skills. This becomes a task when it comes to ‘specialised’ vocabulary or vocabulary that is specific to any particular field or area of study like health science, law or engineering.

Most of the time when curriculum is designed and developed for ESP, it takes into consideration all the major skills (reading, listening speaking, writing). The material is designed around the

content subjects and the future job situations. Content based language learning helps the students to communicate efficiently in their job situations in future.

I had the opportunity to design and pilot a course in English for Legal Secretaries and Court Reporters. That was when I faced the task of identifying a methodology to teach specialised vocabulary to these students who were expected to have reasonably good vocabulary skill covering many areas of specialisation of which the most demanding was law, economics and medicine. They are not specialising in language so it was felt that they shouldn't be taken through the traditional method of teaching and learning vocabulary. There was a need to identify a more practical and effective method based on their future job situation.

### **Listening Situations of Court Reporters**

The listening situations to which the court reporters have to function can be called nonreciprocal because they do not play a part in the discourse that goes on in the courtroom. Their job demands them to listen to the discourse and record the court proceedings fully and correctly. In a situation of this nature, there are only visual and vocal cues to support comprehension of what is heard. The established concept is that learners with a good command of vocabulary and a general knowledge of the rhythm of speech should be able to understand most of what is heard. Ur (1984) has observed that "heard discourse which closely corresponds to what the listener expects and needs to hear is far more likely to be accurately perceived and understood than that which is unexpected, irrelevant or unhelpful". The learners of this course had to devise a way to manage the 'unexpected, irrelevant or unhelpful' information in a one-time listening situation. This was creating problems for them. These students needed additional support to their language skills to be able to cope with the demands of their profession. Within the time frame of the course it became necessary to find a source for this additional support from their learning situation. Therefore the other related subjects covered by the course and the legal environment in which they have to work, naturally become the first resource to be used to overcome the situational constraints and to achieve improved comprehension to meet the challenges of the intensive listening situations to which they are exposed.

### **Schematic Knowledge and Listening**

Research and theories have proved that schematic knowledge facilitates comprehension and helps to overcome most of the barriers. This is advantageous in listening situations where it is not possible to get assistance from the speaker to help understanding.

### **Role of Schematic Knowledge in Listening**

The role of schematic knowledge in listening is acknowledged by Rost (2002) when he stated that the listener has multiple sources of information that facilitate word recognition and help achieve comprehension. The concept of schema, from which the term schematic is derived, is associated with the work of the cognitive psychologist Bartlett (1932). Bartlett's theory stated that humans that share the same socio-cultural background had certain specific psychological tendencies that hold them together as a group and provide "a bias for dealing with external circumstances". This bias according to him activates prior knowledge in the memory, which in turn helps comprehension. Anderson and Lynch (1988), define schema as "a mental structure consisting of relevant individual knowledge, memory and experience, which allows us to incorporate what we learn into what we know". The schematic knowledge is generally considered as two types of prior knowledge: the 'content schema' or background information of a topic and the 'formal schema' or knowledge of discourse organisation and socio-cultural knowledge (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2000). When we look into the situation of the students in the Court Reporter's course, the language skills acquired by the students provide them with the technical knowledge that allow to follow the discourse organisation of the court speeches. This skill is complemented by their knowledge of the social and cultural background of the people involved. The additional subjects

that these students study like Law and Public Administration and Management, help them to acquire the background knowledge specifically necessary for their job situation. Bartlett (1932) describes 'background knowledge' as a 'network' that links social groups, provides images in the mind that aids comprehension and provides a mental frame work of institutions and customs which will become a 'schematic basis for constructive memory'. Here he brings out the ability of the human mind to facilitate comprehension by drawing supporting information from the stores of memory. The students are imparted with the necessary skills and knowledge but they are not trained to coordinate the knowledge and skill, and utilize it effectively.

### **Schematic Knowledge and Language Skill in Listening**

Widdowson (1978) considers acquiring the skills to correlate the co- text and the context as 'the heart of communicative ability' and Ridgeway (2000) believed that "without this ability a stretch of spoken text can be totally incomprehensible". Johnson (2001) concurs with Bartlett's (1932) theory of schemata in the context of the listener's role in comprehension. He states that to achieve comprehension of a foreign language, knowledge of the language has to go beyond understanding words and structures in isolation. He suggests background knowledge or applying schemata to text as the important aspect of comprehension. He believes that "a learner needs to be equipped with it if she is to be a good listener". All these views show the importance of schematic knowledge in achieving comprehension. When Anderson and Lynch (1988) say that successful listening has to be 'active', they are in fact referring to the amount of mental activity involved in it and in their view

Understanding is not something that happens because of what a speaker says: the listener has a crucial part to play in the process, by activating various types of knowledge and by applying what he knows to what he hears and trying to understand what the speaker means.

(Anderson and Lynch 1988:6)

This mental activity is precisely the role that schematic knowledge plays in triggering off memory or 'the mental network' of prior knowledge and it tallies with Rost's (2002) definition of comprehension as "the process of relating language to concepts in one's memory and to references in the real world". Rost's (2002) theory that for complete comprehension to take place the listener will need a "clear concept in the memory for every referent used by the speaker" is similar to that expressed by Brown (1990) when she says that humans are "active searchers for meaning" and when "armed with all the relevant background knowledge", will be able to monitor the incoming acoustic signals, shape and confirm the meaning of what is heard.

Rost (1990), Brown (1990), Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) and several others have emphasized how comprehension can be acquired through a combination of both the bottom-up method of language learning, which emphasises phonology, and the top-down method, which emphasises the use of schematic and contextual knowledge. The students had already acquired good linguistic knowledge or bottom-up processing skills and since the listening situations to which they are exposed to are very context specific, a skill that helps to activate their prior knowledge of the context could be highly beneficial for them to address their problem. Brown and Yule (1983) and Underwood (1989) also agree that the contextual knowledge places a listener in a more advantageous position to understand what is heard. Faerch and Kasper (1986) had always supported the role of contextual information in helping to bridge the gaps caused by 'input noise' and assisting comprehension. They point out the role played by knowledge of the context or the background information to make inferences that assist comprehension in situations where listening is affected due to external factors like the unfamiliar accent, inaudible voice or disturbing noise. Therefore what these students need is skill to use the prior knowledge to improve their listening.

Ridgeway (2000:54/2) has put forward a contrary view in his article on listening strategies. He

feels that listening in a foreign language is highly demanding task and therefore it places a lot of load on memory. He also feels that “with our attention focused on the spoken text, there is no time or mental capacity for other conscious operations”. But he suggests practice as the most important thing as he feels when there is continuous exposure to listening situations “the sub skills will take care of themselves as they become automated”. This then leads to the question: What is it that is helping to ‘take care of the sub skills’? The answer obviously is ‘schematic knowledge’ because frequent exposure to various listening situations help to store information in the mind.

### **Limitations of Schematic Knowledge**

We should not totally ignore the limitations of schematic knowledge as an additional input to support comprehension, especially in a nonreciprocal situation. Anderson and Lynch (1988), Rost (2002), Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) and others have pointed out how a lack of shared schemata can make comprehension difficult or lead to misunderstanding. This problem arises when there is a socio-cultural difference between the listener and the speaker. Occasionally in the work situations of the court reporters this aspect could create problems. Brown (1990) has pointed out that being sensitive to the socio-cultural behaviours and skilfully combining linguistic knowledge and pragmatic knowledge can help to overcome this problem.

### **Conclusions Drawn**

Even though there has not been much research conducted into how to activate the schematic knowledge in listening or to measure the amount of support it provides to achieve accuracy in comprehension, it is proven beyond doubt that all humans have the intelligence to create schemata, according to their experience and exposure in life. Schematic knowledge is very beneficial, especially in situations where information is not easily comprehensible due to factors that could create a communication barrier, such as cultural relativity or the cognitive inaccessibility of information. In the nonreciprocal listening situations the court reporters, could activate schematic knowledge to support listening skills and enhance comprehension. Therefore, even if one has good language skills, ability to activate relevant schemata for the context will contribute towards better comprehension.

### **A Study to Evaluate Coordination of Skills**

In order to find if the knowledge, which the students already processed, could assist with the listening and note-taking situation, a study was conducted on the students in the programme. The aim of the study was to evaluate the performance of the students and to find out if, prior knowledge of the listening situation assisted their already acquired language skills and improved their note taking skills.

### **Methodology**

The class of 18 students were divided into two groups for this study. One group went through a number of pre-listening activities like discussions on the types of situation on which a case could be based on if the case is registered for hearing under the title, for example; ‘Thompson vs. Anderson Associates: Breach of Contract’. They also discussed the general regulations related to contracts, and the possible nature of the discussions and judgement on a case of a similar nature. They listed the possible technical words and other context specific words that could be heard in the course of the interrogations. After this both the groups listened to a pre-recorded study material and recorded it at a speed of 140 words per minute. Similar exercises were done using a variety of other listening situations, gradually increasing the speed of recording to 160 words per minute.

### **Results**

The performance of the students revealed that the group that had the advantage of a pre listening session was able to perform at a much higher level than the rest of the class. They were able to complete the recording and to achieve the required speed. However there were some errors where they had tried to guess the words, which were not very audible or distorted by “noise”. But the guessed words were close to the original words, which showed that the students had tried to make a very intelligent guess. The result provided the encouragement to extend the methodology to the whole class. The students maintained personal records of the context specific vocabulary that they came up with in different types of cases. To re-ascertain the advantages of this strategy, the students were put through several pre-listening situations and note taking exercises similar to ones given during the study. Eventually the pre listening session was reduced to just informing students the type of case they were going to record and they were given a few minutes to take a quick look at their vocabulary records. The speed of recording was also gradually increased to clock the targeted speed of 160 words per minute. Repeated practice using the same method showed remarkable improvement in the performance of the students. Obtaining higher level of accuracy in the information recorded and at the same time gaining speed in recording was a real achievement for these students.

### **Implications of the Study**

The students benefited from the pre-listening sessions because they provided the students with the schema from which they drew word recognition and could predict and infer the context of the speech. Faerch & Kasper (1986) concurs with Krashen (1982:21) to express the view that a learner, as in the case of this experimental group, can utilise the schematic knowledge for comprehension purposes when they do not have sufficient linguistic input to support understanding. Brown (1990) mentions how the knowledge activated by the schema helps to ignore the ‘individual variables’ and move to a higher level for comprehension in certain situations when the ‘same’ sound spoken by different individuals differ due to physical characteristics of the acoustic signals, or manner of delivery of the individual. This aspect of schematic knowledge helps to avoid misunderstanding that leads to errors in recording and this had highly benefited these students. Johnson (2001) feels that many foreign language learners ‘suffer’ from an excess of bottom-up practice, which develops in them the habit of depending solely on their language skill, which will affect their progress in comprehending information even if they cannot understand just one word in what they are listening to. He therefore emphasises the importance of pre listening activities in teaching listening as a way of developing the habit of activating schemata to assist understanding. The pre listening sessions trained the students to look beyond their language skills for comprehension.

Rost (2002) points out that, schema organisation in the mind and the way that the memory is activated is influenced by the importance given to it, the frequency of activation and how recently it was activated. In the case of the court reporters the schema that is relevant for a situation will be similar to that of other situations since their listening situations are very context specific. In every new situation they will be unconsciously updating the already existing schemata. This combined with the high frequency of activation due to their professional requirement will help to build a strong support base for the language skill of the court reporters, who have to listen and record a discourse over which they have no control. The schematic knowledge will provide students with the benefit of an additional input to support their language skills. This again supports the view that high levels of listening comprehension skill are based on systemic or linguistic knowledge, and schematic or non-linguistic information (Widdowson 1983).

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that in a context specific nonreciprocal listening situation, schematic knowledge can be very useful to an advanced learner who has already acquired a reasonable level of linguistic competence. The schematic knowledge helps to activate relevant schemata for the context, which assists with word recognition and helps to overcome barriers to the

understanding of speech. Introducing training in relevant schemata activation through pre-listening activities can help the learners to develop their comprehension and note taking. In the situation of Court Reporters these skills are needed to activate similar schemata and to build up a strong schematic knowledge that can improve their listening and hence their performance in the job situation.

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