



Listening and Speaking Skills – A Complex Challenge Toward Communicative Competence in a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes two of the most important skills in foreign language learning: listening and speaking, which directly influence the development of communicative competence as the main objective of the teaching and learning process in a foreign language.

Listening and speaking skills, known as macro-skills, alongside reading and writing, are developed through specific didactic activities centered on the two key actors of the learning process: the student on the one hand and the teacher on the other.

Listening constitutes the foundation of language acquisition, as through it students are exposed to linguistic structures, intonation, rhythm, and communicative context. On the other hand, speaking requires not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to organize thoughts, respond in real time, and interact effectively.

The integration of these two skills creates a dynamic and challenging process that leads to the achievement of comprehensive communicative competence — linguistic, emotional, interpretative, critical, and constructive.

KEY WORDS: second language acquisition, comprehensible input, speaking skill, listening skill, competence, communication, teaching/learning.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of communicative competence in a foreign language is not limited to the knowledge of grammatical rules or vocabulary. It involves the ability to use language in a functional, accurate, and appropriate manner in real-life situations. Within this competence, listening and speaking skills occupy a central position, as they represent the interactive dimension of communication.

In this paper, we will focus on two of the main skills in foreign language learning, specifically in the Italian language: listening and speaking. Taken together, these two skills produce communication as a form of action carried out through spoken and written language. We will not merely present theoretical studies related to communication and communicative competence—although they are undoubtedly important and supportive—but rather aim to implement theoretical principles within the didactic context of foreign language teaching.

Alongside the review of relevant literature focusing on listening and speaking skills with a communicative function, we will shift our attention to a classroom setting where a foreign language is taught—specifically Italian—and attempt to explain how two of the most essential skills that a student must master in learning a foreign language directly influence the strengthening of communicative competence.

1. The Interconnection Between Listening and Speaking

Listening and speaking skills constitute two fundamental pillars of communicative competence in a foreign language. They are closely interconnected and develop in parallel, as successful communication requires both understanding the message and clearly expressing one's thoughts.

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Michael Long¹ is one of the researchers who developed the *Interaction Hypothesis*, emphasizing the importance of interaction and real communication in the development of listening and speaking skills. Good listening supports the improvement of speaking, as students acquire accurate models of pronunciation, structures, and natural language use. Conversely, speaking helps learners test and reinforce what they have understood during listening. In this way, listening and speaking are reciprocal processes.

Stephen Krashen², in discussing the *Input Hypothesis*, argues that listening plays a primary role and that speaking naturally emerges once the learner has received sufficient input. In contrast, Merrill Swain³, when presenting the *Output Hypothesis*, emphasizes that input alone is not enough; learners must produce language (output), as only through speaking do they become aware of gaps in their knowledge. Furthermore, language production promotes grammatical awareness.

Let us now analyze these two language skills in detail.

1.1. Listening Skill

At first glance, listening may seem to develop almost automatically, with little room for didactic intervention. However, with the advent of communicative methodologies, listening is increasingly viewed as an activity that requires the listener's full cognitive and affective engagement.

Listening is the foundation of communication. In the process of learning a foreign language, the student is initially exposed to the sounds, rhythm, stress, and structures of the language. Through my twenty years of experience as an Italian language instructor, I have identified the main challenges students face during listening, such as: the speed of native speakers, various accents and dialects, unfamiliar vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and the difficulty of understanding both the general meaning and specific details simultaneously.

To reduce these difficulties, systematic listening activities must be practiced that promote active listening, which requires concentration, and the use of strategies such as predicting content, identifying key words, and understanding from context.

Listening is not a passive process. It involves:

- Phonetic perception: identifying sounds;
- Lexical processing: recognizing words;
- Syntactic analysis: understanding sentence structure
- Semantic and pragmatic interpretation: understanding the message in context.

Active listening occurs when students participate in a conversation through questions and reactions. Active listening helps prevent misunderstandings and strengthens interpersonal relationships.

Passive listening refers to situations where students are invited simply to listen without interaction, whereas critical listening involves analyzing and evaluating the information received.

For each type of listening, the teacher must prepare specific didactic activities to develop the skill effectively.

1.2. Speaking Skill

Speaking is a productive skill that allows students to express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. It requires not only grammatical and lexical knowledge but also confidence and fluency. The main challenges students face during the speaking process include: fear of making mistakes, insufficient vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, thinking in their native language, and direct translation. Speaking develops through active practice, discussions, role-plays, presentations, and real interaction. This leads to clear, coherent, and well-structured communication.

During the speaking process, we expect students to achieve:

1. Fluency – the ability to speak without unnecessary pauses or hesitation.
2. Accuracy – correct use of grammatical structures.
3. Pronunciation – clear articulation, correct stress, and natural rhythm.
4. Pragmatic competence – adapting language appropriately to a given situation.

Speaking (output) is essential because it helps learners notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge. By producing language, students become aware of what they do not yet fully know, which in turn promotes language development.

2. Listening and Speaking Skills According to Language Proficiency Levels

In this section, we will analyze listening and speaking skills according to the different language levels defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

¹ Long, Michael, *Input and Second Language Acquisition Theory*, 1985, In Gass, Susan;

² Krashen, S. , *The Input Hypothesis*, 1980, London

³ Swain, M. (1985), *Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development*, in Lightbown, P. M. & Spada, N. (2013), *How languages are learned*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Each language level includes a specific set of lexical, grammatical, and communicative resources. The two skills under discussion—listening and speaking—are relevant in every lesson, regardless of the learner’s proficiency level.

Next, we propose several didactic activities directly related to listening and speaking—not just for hearing, but for understanding, analyzing, debating, and ultimately communicating. The goal is to experiment with increasingly effective strategies for active listening within the foreign language teaching process.

Below, we summarize a representative example of a proposed activity for each language level.

Type of Listening Texts:

Students listen to a simple dialogue related to introductions, requesting basic information, or booking a hotel room. They are asked to determine whether certain statements about the dialogue are 'true' or 'false'. They are also required to repeat phrases from the dialogue, focusing on accurate pronunciation and correct intonation.

Language Level: B1–B2 Type of Listening Texts:

First, students demonstrate their understanding of the text by selecting the correct option from several statements.

Finally, students are given a task to write a similar text about cinema in their home country, applying the vocabulary and structures learned.

We focus more on the C1–C2 language level, because listening and speaking activities at this stage are directly linked to communicative competence.

First Activity:

Cosa significa: "A te come butta?"

a. *La colpa è tua?*

b. A te come va?

How's it going?

c. Hai gettato la spazzatura?

Did you take out the trash?

Next, the student is asked to create a new situation in which the idiomatic expression encountered during listening can be used.

This activity is designed to focus students' attention on the key elements of the audio content.

To facilitate the process, the text can be photocopied for the students. Some words may be omitted, and students are asked to underline the missing words in the text and fill them in while listening. Next, students are asked to read aloud the words that were not initially read.

Finally, group discussions are conducted to compare opinions and allow students to express personal viewpoints, reinforcing both comprehension and speaking skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Listening and speaking skills represent a significant challenge in the development of communicative competence in a foreign language. However, through contemporary teaching methods, continuous practice, and the creation of a communicative environment, these skills can be successfully developed, enabling students to communicate confidently and effectively.

According to the communicative approach and language acquisition theories, input (listening) forms the foundation of output (speaking), creating a balance between the two in teaching foreign languages. Indeed, to participate successfully in a communicative process, learners must be able to accurately perceive others' messages and, at the same time, express their own messages clearly. These processes of active listening and expressing ideas through speaking are realized through didactic activities that aim to: Provide diverse perspectives, stimulate debates, promote comparative analysis and develop negotiation skills. Such activities also require the use of cognitive and linguistic abilities, highlighting that foreign language communication is not merely the knowledge of rules but the ability to understand and express oneself in real-life situations. Language is learned through functional use, and classroom activities should simulate authentic communicative situations.

Understanding communication involves transmitting a message as clearly as possible. Students are expected not only to apply grammatical rules but also to use the foreign language accurately and appropriately. Communication should also integrate social and relational elements, maintain critical thinking, and allow for the expression of personal opinions.

Primarily, teachers should guide students to express themselves and communicate in a language that, while preserving spontaneity, remains clear and precise. In the act of communication, the listener must not only comprehend the speaker but also discern the speaker's primary intent, understanding what is unsaid. This can be achieved, for example, through dialogue activities that emphasize intonation, textual coherence, pauses, cohesion, and functional repetition.

A foreign language serves as an instrument of communication and expression of another culture, and as a means of contact and interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds, it becomes an intercultural tool.

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