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Dear readers,

With every new edition of the *Horizons* scientific journal, the academic public has become used to the expectation that it traces new pathways towards its further establishment in the international educational and scientific – research areas.

For the coming period, just as it did previously, *Horizons* will continue to respect the principles of scientific impartiality and editorial justness, and will be committed to stimulating the young researchers in particular, to select *Horizons* as a place to publish the results of their contemporary scientific and research work. This is also an opportunity for those, who through publishing their papers in international scientific journals such as *Horizons*, view their future carrier development in the realm of professorship and scientific-research profession.

The internationalization of our *Horizons* journal is not to be taken as the furthest accomplishment of our University publishing activity. Just as the scientific thought does not approve of limitations of exhaustive achievements, so is every newly registered success of the *Horizons* editions going to give rise to new “appetites” for further objectives to reach.

Last but not the least, we would like to express our sincere appreciation for the active part you all took in the process of designing, creating, final shaping and publishing the scientific journal. Finally, it is with your support that *Horizons* is on its way to attain its deserved, recognizable place where creative, innovative and intellectually autonomous scientific reflections and potentials will be granted affirmation, as well as an opportunity for a successful establishment in the global area of knowledge and science.

Sincerely,
Editorial Board

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THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING AND COMPREHENSION SKILLS IN LISTENING EXCERCISES IN GERMAN LANGUAGE CLASSES¹

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Abstract

¹ professional paper

This study explores the listening and comprehension skills in German language class exercises, in the Republic of Macedonia. The primary and secondary level curriculum, that the Bureau of Education Development in the Ministry of Education of Republic of Macedonia has put forward, describes the presence of listening skills in German language classes of all levels. The same curriculum forms a basis for the discussion regarding the presence of listening skills in German language classes.

The types of listening play a big part in the application of listening exercises. The tasks of great importance to the German teachers are: raising the students' expectations and explaining the procedure of the listening exercise to the students. At the end of this text recommendations regarding raising the listening interest, improving the listening process and developing listening competency are given.

Keywords: listening, listening comprehension, listening interest, listening competencies

Introduction

The curriculum from the Bureau of Education Development in the Ministry of Education of Republic of Macedonia offers teachers a basis for preparation, creation and realization of the German classes for each grade.

The basic goals of the German language classes (from sixth grade elementary² to fourth year secondary school³), in which students learn German as a second foreign language, having 2 classes weekly or 72 classes yearly, emphasize the qualification of students to be able to communicate in German and use it in everyday life.

This means communication with people from German-speaking countries whose native language is German or people from other countries that speak German. The communication can be done in written or spoken form. For the students to be able to communicate in a foreign language, they need to be educated in all of the four language skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking.

The similarity of German with English, which is the most spoken language, helps in understanding German easier and shortens the process of developing listening and speaking competencies.⁴

The specific goals of German language classes, put forward by the Bureau of Education Development, state that the student needs to:

- form and develop the linguistic, communicational, and intercultural competencies needed for studying a second foreign language
- develop competencies for association of knowledge from the first foreign language, native language and other subjects - when learning a second foreign language

²<http://www.bro.gov.mk/docs/NastavniprogramiVlodd.pdf> (2010:159)

³<http://bro.gov.mk/docs/gimnazisko/zadolzitelnipredmeti/GermanskijazikIVg.vtorstranskjazik.pdf>

⁴<http://www.bro.gov.mk/docs/NastavniprogramiVlodd.pdf> (2010:159)

- form elementary competencies for listening, speaking, reading and writing through building a knowledge system that includes linguistic and sentential units, phonetic, spelling, lexical and grammatical terms
- develop competencies for individual learning and self-evaluation according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Portfolio)⁵

If there is a lack or absence of any of the four skills, the foreign language is not fully mastered and the basic goal of the subject – German language, which is communication in German, is not fulfilled.

Listening and comprehension in listening exercises

This study attempts to confirm the value of listening or listening comprehension, which is very important or perhaps the most important issue when communicating in a foreign language, because an insufficient listening comprehension makes communication harder or in some cases impossible.

At the same time, the way of application of listening exercises is analyzed. Are the listening exercises left out, are they done without prior preparation of the students (introduction in the subject, prior explanation of the vocabulary in the exercise)?

For an analysis to be possible, some terms which are essential to this study need to be defined. The term **listening** describes the ability to register acoustic signals under various circumstances and differentiate them using certain parts of the brain.⁶

Listening comprehension is the ability to understand the foreign language text in the foreign language class⁷. Listening comprehension is an important part of direct communication, as well as an isolated activity in indirect communication.

Listening types

In the German classes, the term listening comprehension stands for the receptive ability to understand a spoken text in the target language.⁸

In the didactic-methodical professional literature, the term listening is mistakenly synonymous with listening comprehension/understanding. In professional literature, the term is accompanied by the following listening types:

- discriminative listening: certain sounds need to be heard correctly and differentiated from others
- extensive listening (=global listening or cursory listening): a few central statements are sufficient for understanding the main statement of the text
- intensive listening (= total listening, detailed listening): all of the information in a text is important; all details need to be understood to grasp the whole meaning of the text
- selective listening (=lat. seligere, selectus= to choose): only certain information from the text that is important needs to be heard

⁵<http://www.bro.gov.mk/docs/NastavniprogramiVlodd.pdf> (2010:160)

⁶Jung, L. (2001:90)

⁷Dahlhaus B. (1997:186)

⁸Jung, L. (2001:91)

- focused listening: being alert when listening to certain important information⁹

Easing comprehension in a listening text

In German classes, apart from the types of listening which are important for correct completion of the listening exercises, the teacher needs to manage the listening process, i.e. to affect the listening process through task assignment/preparation. One example is task in which certain expectations are created in order to provoke certain listening interest.¹⁰ An important component of managing the listening process is clarification, which is a procedure that removes the obstacles in understanding the text. There are two types of clarification:

- linguistic clarification: the unknown vocabulary in a new text is clarified prior to the first listening/reading
- phonetic clarification: the probable difficulties in understanding sounds in a listening text (for ex. bad pronunciation) are discussed or practiced before the listening¹¹

When practicing the listening competencies both types of clarification need to be used so that the listening tasks and goals are completed easier. The listening and understanding are made easier in a situation when the speaker is from a TV show or a video. In this case the speaker's mimicking, gesticulation and body language helps understanding the content.¹² However, that is possible only when the speaker is visible and if the speaker is invisible (for ex. a phone call, airport, bus station or supermarket announcements) the understanding is difficult.

Whether or not a spoken text is heard on radio, television, in a dialogue situation or on a tape or CD in German class, it is useful to recognize structuring signals which help in understanding the text. Such signals *are before, or, however, afterwards, since, after all, what's more* etc.¹³

Prior knowledge activation

A further important component for successful mastering of the listening and listening comprehension skills is **prior knowledge activation**. Prior knowledge is information and skills that we bring forward to class, as something that we have gained in previous classes. Prior knowledge helps in task understanding and resolution. To activate the prior knowledge means to recall memories that are passive but still present.¹⁴

In addition, raising the **listening expectation** is another important element of developing listening skills. Listening expectation means information that is put forward to the students before the class, certain content, situation or speaking constellation that they would "expect".¹⁵ For example, if in a listening exercise that contains announcements from a train station in Germany, we prepare the students to expect to hear the desired destination and the train's platform number, then we have reached the goal and

⁹Dahlhaus B. (1997:186)

¹⁰ Dahlhaus B. (1997:186)

¹¹Dahlhaus B. (1997:188)

¹²Rampillon U. (1999:128)

¹³ Rampillon U. (1999:124)

¹⁴Dahlhaus B. (1997:186)

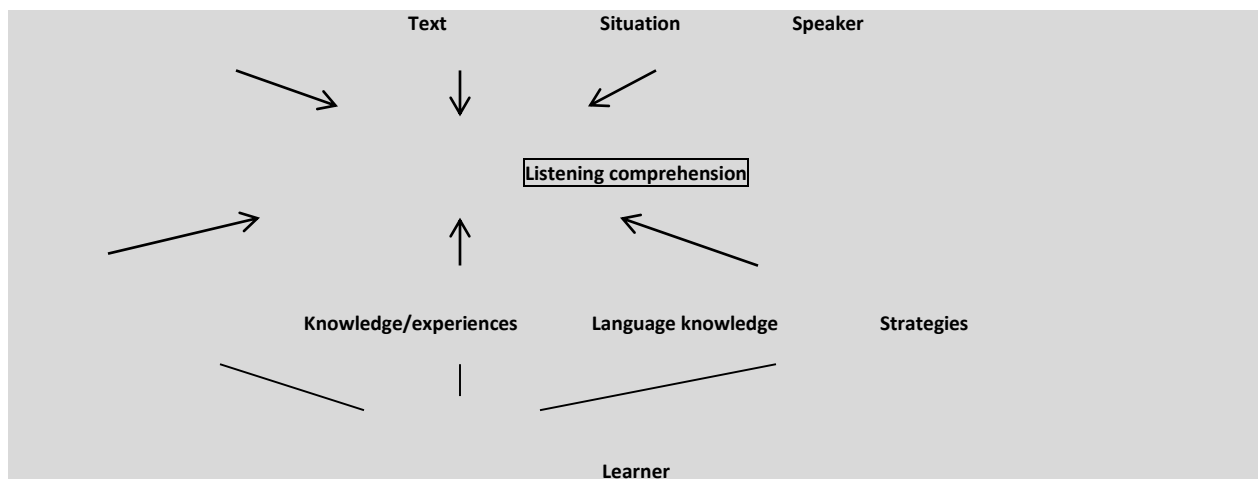
¹⁵Dahlhaus B. (1997:186)

completed the task in that listening exercise. That means that we have prepared the students for selective listening for extraction of the needed information.

If the German language teacher respects and uses all of the aforementioned components in his/hers classes, then he/she is doing a good job in developing his/hers students' listening competencies. Listening competency is the ability to react to different listening texts with different types of listening.¹⁶

The listening comprehension is a constellation of (neuro)-physiological, mental and cognitive factors. With the auditory perception of a spoken sound, many processes start simultaneously. Based on the spoken information, they initiate memorization of the semantical, syntactic, pragmatic structures and/or listening patterns and mental images. The listening comprehension is influenced by many factors such as the speaker, listener, content/text or situation.¹⁷

That becomes even clearer if all factors that influence listening comprehension are differentiated, and by that the complexity of this skill will be reduced. A. Brown¹⁸ created the following scheme:



The scheme shows that external factors, such as the text, situation of speaker influence the heard content and the student needs to activate his/hers prior knowledge, experience, language knowledge and strategies.

Survey and results

Taking into account that all four skills are important in German classes, the teachers and students have to be aware of the fact that those skills should be equally present in class. With doing that the students

¹⁶ Dahlhaus B. (1997:186)

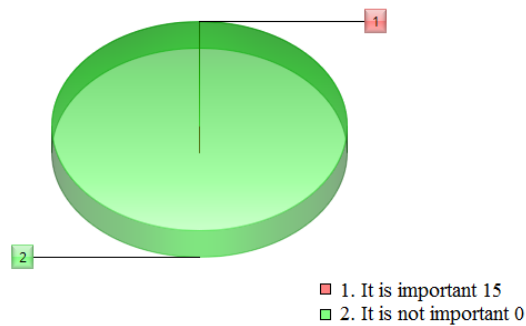
¹⁷Jung, L. (2001:91)

¹⁸Braun, A. (2008:103)

would be able to learn German on a level that is proposed with the curriculum. As support to the points made, we present the opinions from students – future German teachers and German learners of many years and their answers to the first question from our survey:

- Do you think that listening is an important skill which needs to be learned and practiced in German classes in R. of Macedonia?

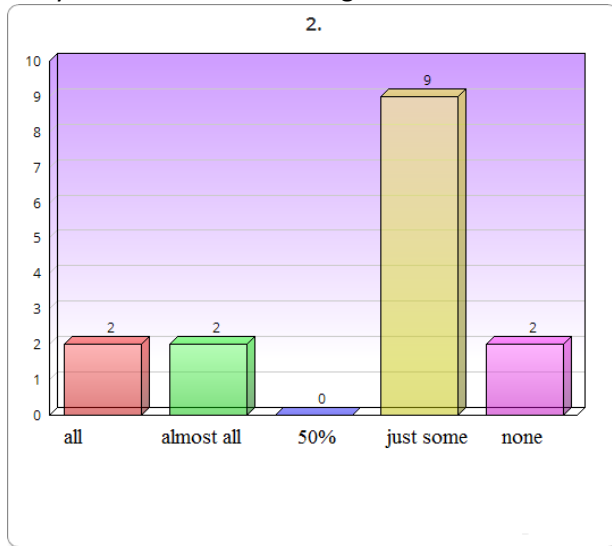
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The hundred percent positive answer indicates the awareness of the importance of listening, supported with an explanation for their opinion:

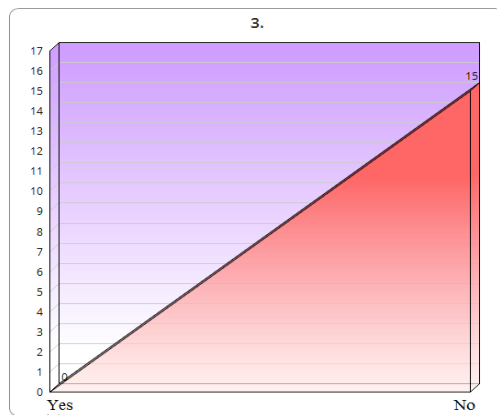
- We can listen to the correct pronunciation as we learn German
- We learn the language better with listening to the correct pronunciation, accent and vocabulary (reported by 11 students)
- The communication and our understanding of the language improves
- You can learn only by doing practice exercises
- Young children learn by hearing first

- Did you do all of the listening exercises in German class in primary or secondary school?



From the results, we can conclude that only 2 participants have done all of the listening exercises, the same number of participants have done almost all of the exercises/have not done any of the exercises. The largest number of participants – 9 or about 60% have done just some of the exercises in German class.

Some students do not like listening exercises. Are you one of them?



The hundred percent positive answers lead us to the conclusion that students have awareness of the importance of listening skills. It is also an evidence for a possible attempt from their teachers to start applying the listening exercises in their class, taking into account the aforementioned steps such as introduction of the subject, clarification of the unknown vocabulary, correct explanation of the listening exercise, application of an appropriate type of listening etc.

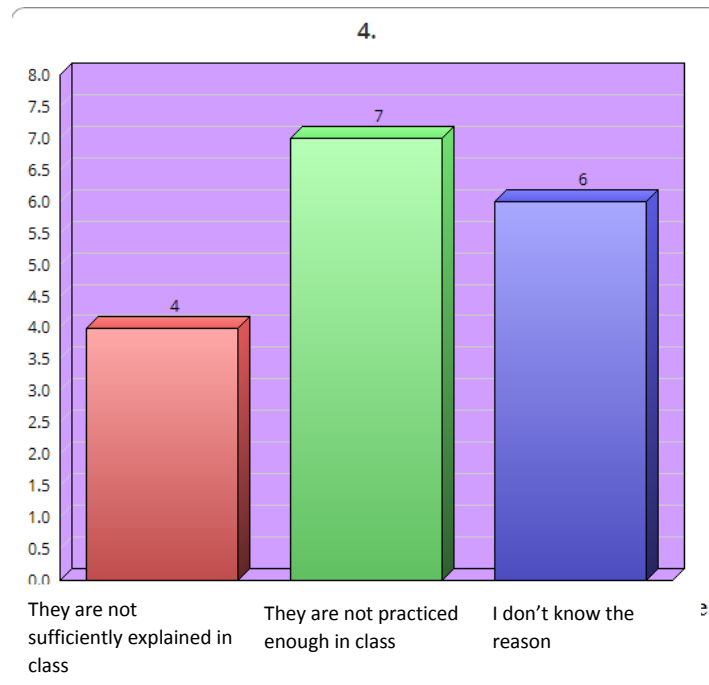
Furthermore, we take a look at the analysis – what would be the reason **not** to like the listening exercises?

The students voiced their opinion from three possible answers:

- *they are not explained in class;*

- *they are not practiced enough in class;*
- I don't know the reason.

Multiple choices were possible.

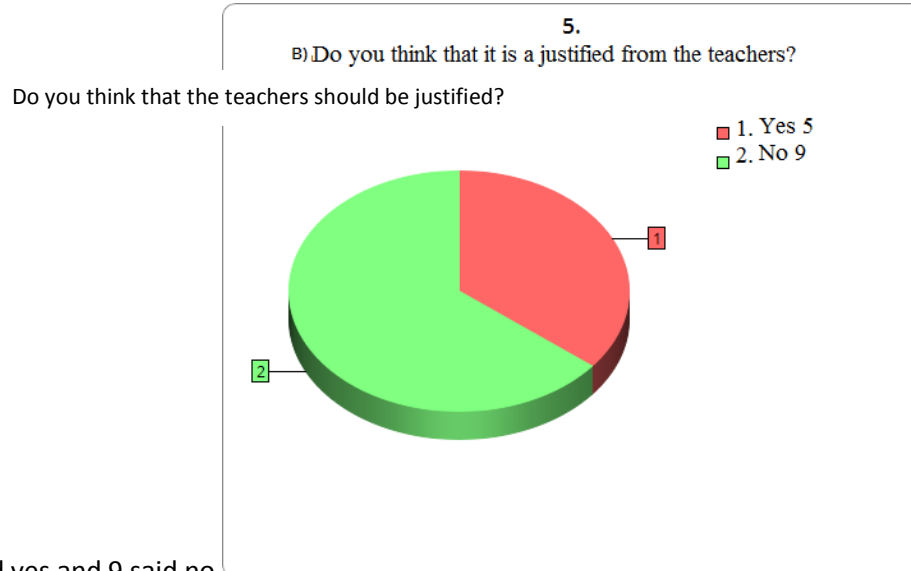


Roughly the same number of answers are for – *they are not practiced enough in class*, and *I don't know the reason*. We believe that these answers will motivate students to think about what would they do if/when they become German teachers.

After the understanding of the factual situation in schools, the following hypothetical standpoint arose:

Some teachers claim that they do not do the listening exercises because they do not have the right equipment (stereo, CD player etc.) and they skip them from the textbook. The high number of disagreements to the teachers' claim shows us the students are aware of the importance of doing listening exercises in class, as it is absolutely wrong to leave them out.

When asked if the reason that listening exercises should be left out because they need a lot of preparing



is justified, 5 students said yes and 9 said no.

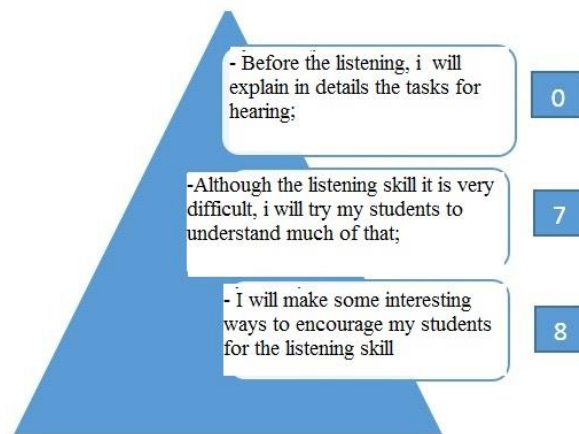
The students who think that this should not be justified give reason to their standpoints with the following:

- Every teacher that loves his profession and enjoys in what he/she does should always find time/a way to do his/her duties without looking for an excuse.
- The teacher should not just push the “play” button, without prior preparation for the listening exercise.
- The exercises need preparation, but they are very helpful.
- The procedure is described in detail.
- We only need a device that will reproduce the listening material.
- listening exercises are vital for the students’ knowledge
- With the listening we hear the foreign language frequently
- This should be of equal importance as reading, writing, etc.
- The teachers have sufficient time for preparation.

The third part of the hypothetical standpoint is “The students will not understand anything, so why should we bother? I will give them the answers at the end either way.” 14 participants in the survey do not agree with this, and one is indifferent.

When asked how the participants will help in overcoming the obstacles in doing the listening exercises in German class, the students declared the following:

You are future German teachers and think listening exercises are important. How would you overcome the obstacles?



When asked for their opinion and previous experience, the students think that if the listening exercises are left out the students would:

- have no interest in learning the language.
- not be able to learn the proper pronunciation, accent and similarities.
- have monotony in the class.
- only study for a test or to get a good grade. If the listening exercises are present, the students would have bigger interest for the language, they would be motivated and they would want to be activated in all activities.
- have an excuse that it is the professors' fault.
- have difficulties in understanding spoken German because reading and writing is different from listening.
- get passive, have insufficient concentration for extracting information.
- not be able to converse with a speaker and understand what the speaker says to them; they would be as a "silent film", knowing all the vocabulary but not being able to use it in an oral situation.
- only be able to communicate in German textually. Eye-to-eye conversation is different from exchanging textual messages. A language does not exist only through writing, it exist through oral transferring of information.
- not have an idea how the "native German" sounds like, as there are Germans from different parts of Germany. Listening skills gives confidence to the students to speak freely, more clearly, to improve their vocabulary and pronunciation.
- be less intellectually activated and lack the psychological perception for different real situations. These situations are quite present in the listening exercises, and the students evoke their personal experiences and interests.
- have problems with the vocabulary and not be able to speak the language if they haven't heard the sound, pronunciation, accent etc.

The teachers need to stick to the previously arranged class plans, and more precisely the listening exercises. They should resist the demands of students to replay the listening exercise. This helps with the students' concentration and is closer to everyday situations (for example radio/TV news, weather forecast

etc.) in which the students don't understand the text word-for-word. That is not the intention of the exercises. They should form suppositions for the content and focus on the central information.¹⁹

The listening texts meant for German classes need to contain as less unknown words as possible, and if there are they should be clarified in class before the exercise. If the students have visual aid for the exercise, for example a photo, table, form etc. that would be very helpful for the students in their understanding. In addition, if the teacher uses kinesthetic support to the text, the students would understand the text even more. The exercise forms in which certain body movements are included help the students' understanding and memorization of the text. For example listen and show the body parts etc.

Conclusion

This study serves as an encouragement to teachers to overcome the difficulties and obstacles that the students have in listening exercises. They can use the elements that are contained in this study, which are: visual and kinesthetic aid, clarification of the unknown words before the class, usage of different types of listening (according to the goal that the teacher had in mind for the exercise), removing the anxiety in students ("that they will not understand a thing in the text")etc. Finally, they can use short and interesting listening exercises more, so that the students can master the listening skill more successfully and be competent to fully communicate in German.

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<http://www.bro.gov.mk/docs/NastavniprogramiVlodd.pdf> (2010:160)

¹⁹Weigmann, J. (1999:76)

