How to improve your listening comprehension skills?

Students sometimes find listening comprehension challenging. But like reading comprehension, it is a skill that must be developed through practice. Certainly, the best practice is face-to-face communication. But not everybody has access to a relative, acquaintance or tutor on a regular basis for various reasons. And even for those who do have such access, limited or regular, there are some simple activities that can help enhance one’s comprehension of spoken Spanish. Of course, the content used in these activities must be level appropriate. Sometimes the student must put additional effort to make the act of listening effective in developing his or her own skills.

One simple way to achieve better comprehension is for the student to seek extra help to take advantage of the audio/visual programs that go along with the textbook. The student can repeat the listening exercises from class, possibly looking at a script. The same could be done with the videos that go along with the textbook. The advantage of this approach is that the content does not require additional work on the part of the student beyond taking the time to listen/video these activities. As long as the student has been studying the vocabulary and grammatical structures at hand, he or she can focus solely on listening skills. The disadvantages of this approach are that it is limited by the recordings made available by the publisher, and that it requires an appointment with the teacher, and one cannot always be made at a convenient time. However, I stay most days after school, so that should not be an issue in my case. Moreover, as we move on to new textbooks, they often provide additional practice online that students can complete without having to meet with the instructor.
Now we will take a look at other forms of audio and video commonly available to the general public. The following two approaches can yield significant benefits in the long term, probably in one or two years, but require students to go beyond what is expected in school.

The first of these approaches involves music. The student can search for Hispanic music in their genres of preference, identify some artists they like, and then translate some of those lyrics. And casually discuss with the teacher those points that prove too challenging. This would be the prep work. One could save time by choosing to copy and paste the lyrics on a translation tool—which because of the “poetic” nature of lyrics will probably result in a confusing and incorrect product--, or searching for readily available English translations of popular Hispanic songs—which often are also inaccurate. But like any shortcut, by not using a dictionary, the student would be missing on numerous additional opportunities for expanding his/her vocabulary.

Once the lyrics are understood, it comes time for the easy task: Listening to the music. This becomes almost effortless. The repetition, together with the isolating nature of headphones, makes this a great activity to develop one's ear.

The challenges of this method are that it takes a significant amount of time to find music that is well-liked, and to translate it. But once the prep work is completed, it can easily be practiced anywhere, for short or long periods of time, and the focused, repeated and enjoyable nature of the activity makes it a preferred method among students. The main disadvantage of this activity is that the language employed in music is typically not a good example of every day register, as it is riddled with metaphors, unusual syntax and other “poetic” devices.
Finally, students can use DVDs to watch videos modifying the language options on the menu. Viewing a personal/family favorite film, tv series or some other content on DVD that has been viewed multiple times. In the case of listening comprehension, the Spanish voice track should be played, together with Spanish subtitles--since the DVD has been viewed multiple times, the student knows the plot rather well. The advantage of this method is that the language is usually “more authentic” than in music. The disadvantages are many. The script is full of vocabulary and grammatical structures that are unknown yet. And it is impossible to translate a whole film script. Which requires a good amount of patience on the part of the student to sit through the video and not become frustrated. Particular accents and voices can pose a challenge. The rate of speech is often fast. One kind of has to get oneself “in the mood” to go through it.

I would recommend the motivated student to find a song a month to translate, and then play repeatedly. And then sit through a video every couple of months. It does not have to be a feature film, it could be an episode of the Simpsons, a documentary, or some other video.

And while other alternatives exist, these have been relied upon for a number of years and are relatively accessible to the majority of the student population.