

A Principled Approach to Teaching Listening

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The teaching of listening has long been misperceived as the least important of the macroskills that make up the basis for communicative competence and thus its significance in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) or English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teaching pedagogy has also been underestimated. However, current literature in language learning and teaching has revealed that listening skills have a salient importance in both first and second language learning and that current opinion is that listening is a many-sided interactive process which requires a more comprehensive approach to teaching it in order to better help learners meet the challenges of real-life listening. This literature review aims to review the basic concepts related to the place and importance of listening skills in learning English as a second or foreign language and encourages pedagogy that actively pursues a principled, research-based approach to teaching listening in L2 contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, within English language pedagogy, listening has been an overlooked skill in some methods of teaching in which more productive skills such as speaking and writing are the main focus (Bozorgian, 2012; Hedge, 2000; Nunan, 2002). For example, the audiolingual approach, while viewing listening as paramount to language learning, was in fact limited in its practice of listening, advocating scripted dialogues and drills to present new target language (Hedge, 2000; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Field, 2008). In many common second language (L2) classroom approaches, the primary focus is on pragmatic listening practice and testing rather than teaching learners how to acquire listening skills. Richards and Renandya (2002) postulate that one possible reason for this was the traditionally held view that listening ability could be passively acquired in class as learners are exposed to L2 input throughout the lessons. However, listening, a necessary communicative macroskill, is slowly being recognized for its prominent importance in L2 learning (Bozorgian, 2012; Nunan, 2002), with a focus on teaching learners the strategies necessary for comprehending spoken English.

Listening is not only a passive skill, but also an important means of acquiring new language (Rost, 2001; 2005). Likewise, Hedge (2000) points out that:

Input gained from listening can have a key role in language

acquisition, so the development of effective strategies for listening becomes important not only for oracy but also for the process of acquiring a new language.(p. 230)

It is listening that many learners of a new target language value as necessary for advancement in their overall L2 progress. If learners cannot comprehend the input they are exposed to in the classroom, they may experience great difficulty in using the language outside the classroom. Thus listening can be seen as having a direct effect on the other communicative macroskills of speaking, reading, and writing. For example, a learner's ability to listen is key to participating effectively in spoken conversation, as Rost (2001) points out when he writes, "there is no spoken language without listening" (p. 1).

Finally, listening is an area in which many learners require greater instruction. According to Shimo (2003), many L2 learners in Japan do not receive enough instruction in listening strategies and comprehension tasks. Due to minimal exposure to these strategic listening activities, learners often experience difficulty with, and anxiety towards, improving their listening abilities (Shimo, 2003). This often leads learners to ask for texts to be repeated multiple times or for subtitles to be used when watching videos. Additionally, within Japanese teaching and learning contexts specifically, learners are also exposed to very little authentic L2 input, and thus, experience greater difficulty in trying to understand spoken English with natural speed and intonation, which further reinforces their frustrations and keeps confidence low. Finally, many learners complain that listening is too difficult, and many learners hold incorrect beliefs about listening in a foreign language, which may adversely affect their ability to improve (Shimo, 2002). It would seem that to improve learners' listening ability, a principled approach that fully considers the research on teaching listening is required.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A selection of literature on L2 listening processes and instruction is discussed below.

What is listening?

Richards and Schmidt (2010, p. 344) describe listening comprehension as:

the process of understanding speech in a first or second language. The study of listening comprehension processes in second language learning focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (e.g. phonemes, words, grammatical structures) as well as the role of the listener's expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and the topic.

As Rost elaborates, listening is a "complex cognitive process...encompass[ing] receptive, constructive, and interpretive aspects of

cognition” (2005, p. 503). In other words, listening involves the process of hearing what has been said, constructing these phonemes or words into longer utterances and sentences, and interpreting the speaker’s intended meaning from what was heard. Listening, therefore, involves two simultaneous, mutually dependent cognitive processes, namely bottom-up and top-down processes (Hedge, 2000, p. 234).

Bottom-up and top-down processes in listening

Bottom-up processes

Bottom-up processes relate to the listener’s ability to distinguish sounds heard in speech and to reconstruct the speaker’s message. Flowerdew and Miller (2005, p. 24) define this as follows:

According to the bottom-up model, listeners build understanding by starting with the smallest units of the acoustic message: individual sounds, or phonemes. These are then combined into words, which, in turn, together make up phrases, clauses, and sentences. Finally, individual sentences combine to create ideas and concepts and relationships between them.

In other words, the overall message is built up from phonetic units, which are placed together like building blocks and constructed into words, phrases and sentences. Anderson and Lynch (1988), cited in Nunan (2002, p. 239), refer to this as the “listener as tape recorder view” because the listener stores the incoming sounds in the order they are heard, much like a tape recorder. On top of this, the listener uses clues from within the text, such as a listener’s lexical knowledge, knowledge of syntactic structure, and linguistic features such as stress, pauses, and enunciation to recreate the meaning of what is heard and predict what will follow (Hedge, 2000). For example, upon hearing the following extract in the news, “In an unprecedented turn of events...,” a listener’s lexical knowledge of the word *unprecedented* can be used to infer that what follows will be something out of the ordinary.

Top-down processes

Top-down processes on the other hand utilise “knowledge that a listener brings to a text” (Hedge, 2000, p. 232) to actively build a “conceptual framework” for comprehending and constructing the meaning of the text (Vandergrift, 2004, p. 4). Hedge (2000, p. 232) further points out:

Top down listening...infers meaning from *contextual clues* and from making links between the spoken message and various types of *prior knowledge* which listeners hold inside their heads.

Hedge further clarifies that contextual clues refer to the listener’s situational knowledge (knowledge of the speaker or setting), while prior knowledge refers to the mental frameworks readers have for different topics. In other words, top-down

processing is concerned with how listeners use knowledge they already possess, often referred to as *schemata*, to reconstruct meaning from what they hear. For example, upon hearing a friend complain about a disappointing meal at a restaurant, a listener might consider what constitutes a disappointing dining experience. Perhaps the food was bad, or the service unprofessional.

Hedge (2000, p. 233) lists three types of schemata used in top-down processing, namely *content schemata*, *formal schemata*, and *script*. Content schemata can refer to general world knowledge, sociocultural knowledge, or knowledge of the topic. Formal schemata refers to the rigid structure of some speech events, such as religious events or academic lectures. Finally, script schemata refers to interactions where the speech follows a set pattern to some extent. For example, when buying a car the salesperson will often ask a series of set questions.

Both top-down and bottom-up processes are seen to be simultaneous, working together in an interactive model (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Both linguistic information within the text and prior knowledge are used by the listener to form an understanding of what was heard. This has implications for L2 listening instruction in that both top-down and bottom-up processes will need to be taught if learners are to become competent listeners.

Difficulties in L2 listening

Listening is often regarded as one of the most challenging skills to learn and teach (Siegel, 2014). Learners often experience feelings of anxiety and insecurity when confronted with L2 listening, perhaps due to the fact that input must be processed in real time (Field, 2008). Learners may only get one chance to comprehend the text, as opposed to reading texts where learners can usually re-read a section if the meaning is ambiguous. Hedge (2000, p. 236) lists seven difficulties, or uncertainties, that L2 listeners face when trying to construct meaning from aural input:

- Uncertainties of confidence
- Uncertainties deriving from the presentation of speech
- Uncertainties because of gaps in the message
- Uncertain strategies
- Uncertainties of language
- Uncertainties of content
- Visual uncertainties

Many learners experience difficulty trying to understand every word of a spoken text. This problem can be especially troublesome for ineffective listeners who are often unable to automatically process what they hear and must constantly focus on only specific details (Vandergrift, 2004). Additionally, motivation can become a problem in some classroom contexts as listening is seen as a receptive skill by some learners, leading to feelings of boredom and frustration (Goh & Taib, 2006). Failure to activate relevant schemata prior to listening can cause additional anxiety; therefore the teacher will need to develop confidence and foster a positive

learning environment (Hedge, 2000).

Features of spoken language such as natural speed, intonation, the blurring of word boundaries and the fact that speech must be processed in real time can all be problematic for learners (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Additionally, Lam (2002) points out that the features of real-world listening input such as the use of time-creating devices, facilitation devices, and compensation devices used to make the production of speech easier can cause problems in understanding L2 speech. Reformulations, pauses, and corrections, for example, are all aspects of natural speech not typically present in written texts, and therefore learners must be made aware of such features to facilitate their understanding. Gaps in the message can also be problematic. For example, in L1 listeners can often predict or make educated guesses, whereas L2 learners may need practice in predicting or gap-fill exercises to overcome any difficulties experienced (Hedge, 2000).

Another difficulty associated with L2 classroom instruction is the visual nature of listening. Classroom instruction often involves the use of audio recordings to provide learners with listening experience. However, in most real-life listening situations the speaker is visible to the listener, and therefore, non-verbal clues such as lip movements, gestures, and body language can be used to comprehend the speaker's message (Hedge, 2000). However, the use of audio recordings can provide useful listening practice for situations when the speaker is not visible—talking on the telephone or listening to the radio.

Finally, learners will need to practise and identify different purposes for listening, such as for gist or for details, which may require different processing skills. Bottom-up processes can help learners develop word recognition skills, whereas top-down processing can build real-life listening skills (Vandergrift, 2004). Rost (2011, p. 182) lists six types of listening which learners will need to practise in order to become competent listeners:

- Intensive listening
- Selective listening
- Interactive listening
- Extensive listening
- Responsive listening
- Autonomous listening

Furthermore, listening may not end with the comprehension of what was said. The listener may be required to listen and form a response based on what was heard. Nunan (2002, p. 239) refers to this as “reciprocal listening.” Nunan further argues that real-world conversation often requires the listener to reply, or demonstrate comprehension. Thus, learners wishing to improve their listening ability will need to practise both reciprocal listening, where they are required to respond, and nonreciprocal listening, such as listening to announcements or radio and television broadcasts.

Teaching Listening

Several teaching techniques are discussed below to illustrate how teachers can better help learners deal with the challenges of listening texts.

Pre-listening

In the pre-teaching stage, the teacher will need to activate relevant schemata to assist learners' top-down processing. Providing context can help students prepare mentally for what they are about to hear. Predicting content, discussion of topics, and forming opinions can all be used to 'set the scene.' However, caution must be taken when providing context for learners. Vandergrift (2004) cites a study by Ginther (2002) demonstrating that the use of context visuals to set the scene had a negative effect on comprehension, whereas content visuals, supporting the text, can aid comprehension. It is also important to create motivation and elicit a purpose for listening. Providing a reason to listen, for example, making predictions about the content of the text, which learners will later then confirm when listening, can help learners to actively engage with the text. Field (1998), however, points out that teachers often spend too much time on the pre-listening stage at the expense of listening practice, and that five minutes should be sufficient to establish context and provide motivation.

Authentic materials

If the goal of listening instruction is to equip learners with the skills to comprehend real-life spoken language, then authentic materials will need to be introduced to expose learners to the features of natural speech. Conceptually, the idea of authentic materials is subjective, but in simple terms, materials that have not been edited or simplified from their original form should be utilized. While using this level of material can be challenging for beginner L2 learners, simplifying the task rather than the material can be a motivating experience, although learners must be made aware that they are not expected to understand every word (Field, 2002). In addition, conversations with clear role relationships and familiar settings can be easier for learners to understand, thus removing some of the uncertainty in the listening task (Hedge, 2000).

A diagnostic approach

A comprehension approach of pre-setting questions and checking for correct answers has long been criticised in much of the L2 listening literature (Field, 1998), maintaining that comprehension questions merely test listening ability rather than teach it, with little or no regard to the processes used to determine the answers. However, in Japan, a recent study of English instruction at tertiary institutions (Siegel, 2014) found that comprehension questions are still used in the majority of listening lessons. Field (1998) suggests that by employing a diagnostic approach to listening by following up with learners on how they reached their answers, teachers can identify where comprehension broke down and focus on these areas for further instruction.

Listening strategies

Teaching of listening strategies, which here refers to the cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies used to compensate for gaps in knowledge, can be beneficial for less skilled learners. Listeners can be seen to also use strategies in L1 when experiencing gaps in the message, perhaps due to outside noise. Therefore the goal of strategy training is to ensure that these techniques are successfully transferred to L2 listening (Field, 1998). Cross (2011) reported improvements in listening comprehension for less skilled learners following a pedagogic cycle of metacognitive instruction, although more skilled learners generally showed no improvement. However, instruction in listening strategies has been criticized in some academic circles, due to a lack of supporting evidence and the additional burden it places on teachers; time spent on strategy instruction would be better spent practicing listening (Renandya & Farrell, 2011).

Subskills and intensive listening

Field (1998, p. 117) makes the following distinction between listening strategies and subskills:

Subskills are seen as competencies which native listeners possess and which non-natives need to acquire in relation to the language they are learning ... Strategies, by contrast, are strictly compensatory: as the listener's listening ability improves, they require less and less.

This suggests that for long term improvements to be made, listeners must develop stronger listening subskills. He further lists three areas in which skills need to be developed: types of listening, discourse features, and techniques. Field (1998) advocates the use of dictation to help learners develop the ability to, for example, anticipate what will come next, distinguish minimal pairs, and identify key points. Hedge (2000) also argues for the benefits of intensive, bottom-up listening practice in the post-listening stage of tasks.

Extensive listening

Recent research on extensive listening has found it to have a positive effect on building comprehension (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Renandya and Farrell argue that listening is best learnt through exposure to large amounts of interesting, enjoyable, comprehensible texts, exemplified in a study by Zhang (2005) in which middle school students who engaged in extensive listening activities outperformed the control group and a group receiving listening strategies instruction. Likewise, Chang and Millet (2014) demonstrated that learners who engaged in extensive listening coupled with extensive reading, showed significant improvements in listening comprehension. Overreliance on extensive listening has been criticised by Siegel (2011), who argues that it should be used to support listening strategy instruction, and not used as the main component of the listening course. However, it seems clear that extensive listening can facilitate comprehension, and is beneficial when learning other skills such as reading (Stephens, 2011).

A PRINCIPLED APPROACH TO TEACHING LISTENING

It seems apparent that many of the techniques currently used to teach listening are somewhat limited, and that a more principled approach is required. L2 listening literature can prove a valuable resource for teachers by helping them make informed decisions regarding the design and implementation of listening tasks. However, as all learners are individuals, and all classroom contexts different, it is necessary to adapt these techniques to suit individual learning styles and to best address learners' needs.

Listening Materials

Much of the literature advocates the use of authentic materials in teaching listening, citing the need to acclimatize students to natural spoken English. Although it is clear that this is necessary for achieving understanding of fluent spoken English, this can often be problematic for low-level or inexperienced learners. Literature suggests activating relevant prior knowledge, informing learners that they need not understand every word, and simplifying tasks to aid comprehension. Shorter authentic listening materials on simple topics should be used to prevent learners from becoming frustrated when unable to comprehend what was said. Although there is a wealth of authentic materials suitable for more advanced learners, shorter, simpler materials may be hard to find. Eastment (2004) provides an extensive list of materials available online as well as advice on how to search for resources. Another concern is that, in transitioning to authentic materials from teacher-dictated simplified listening materials, learners may experience enhanced anxiety at no longer being able to understand the spoken texts. Providing motivation and building confidence will be key to limiting the possibility of increased stress, as well as raising awareness of the features of natural speech, such as pauses and reformulations. Hedge (2000) suggests that semi-authentic texts may also be used to practise listening. Accordingly, when teaching low-level learners it may be useful to scaffold their initial listening instruction with simplified texts before moving on to more challenging authentic materials.

Listening tasks

A variety of tasks should be employed in order to keep interest and provide a range of purposes for listening. Many learners focus too closely on individual words; as a result, they often need additional and more specific practice listening for global meaning. Combining listening for global meaning with authentic materials could be more helpful in developing pragmatic listening skills, such as understanding gist for a particular context; like listening to a series of short news stories and conveying the content to a partner. Tasks providing learners with opportunities to listen for both gist and details, such as listening to the same text multiple times but focussing on different information each time, and those that require listeners to form the kind of responses required in real-life listening, are more effective than traditional comprehension questions (Field, 2002).

Strategies and skills instruction

It seems clear that learners will require some form of strategy instruction to

help compensate for gaps in their learning knowledge. Often ineffective listeners will repeatedly rely on a single strategy like focusing on individual sentences (missing the relationship between other sentences) without changing or adapting their approach. To improve these limitations, learners should be exposed to and practise a variety of strategies. For instance, explaining, modeling, and regularly practising how to set goals, plan tasks, self-monitor, and self-evaluate can help learners to control their listening. Additionally, given the key role that vocabulary plays in listening comprehension (Rost, 2011), learners with limited lexical knowledge would perhaps benefit from instruction and practice in effective strategies instruction that practice anticipating content, inferring, guessing, and recognizing redundancies to improve specific limitations, or persevering with tasks they perceive as being difficult. Furthermore, subskills instruction suggested by Field (1998) will also be beneficial in helping learners to recognise individual words in the stream of language that they hear. White (1998) provides a good range of lesson ideas for teaching both strategies for how to become a good listener, and micro-skills practice to better understand fluent speech.

Extensive listening

Listening for pleasure may seem a rather attractive proposition as learners will feel less anxiety knowing they are not being tested and can simply relax and enjoy the listening experience. However, extensive listening requires quite a large time commitment. In Chang and Millett's study (2014), in addition to extensive listening, learners were required to read a whole book and complete 200 fluency questions a week. Such dedication is not always feasible for students with other commitments outside the classroom. It seems that some kind of compromise is needed if extensive listening is to be included in some L2 classroom contexts. A more realistic target for learners would be to initially listen to short, simple texts in class for enjoyment, before moving on to tasks that encourage learners to listen to one or two texts a week outside the classroom and report back to the group. This could include songs or film trailers, something learners may be particularly interested in.

Integration with other skills

Finally, although many learners have expressed a strong desire to improve their listening skills, few classes focus on listening instruction alone. Therefore, other skills will need to be developed. Nunan (2002, p. 240) suggests that listening activities can utilise materials as "a point of departure," where learners move on from the listening task to provide their own content; for example, listening to a speech and formulating questions for the speaker, or listening to part of a story and writing an appropriate ending. This has the added benefit of making the listening participatory as well as providing further motivation by personalising the task and can help increase learner engagement.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the literature on L2 listening instruction and considered how the techniques discussed can be utilised in a language classroom.

From this, the following principles can be used when planning a course that includes a listening focus:

- Where possible, authentic listening materials should be used to expose the learners to natural spoken English.
- Varied tasks that give learners the opportunity to listen for both general meaning and listen for details should be included.
- Learners should be taught any necessary cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies that will help support their listening practice.
- Extensive listening should be included to help increase the learners' exposure to listening texts.

This approach, based on current research into listening instruction can help learners benefit more from in-class listening instruction. It is important to follow current research in L2 instruction, not just to understand the theories and processes in second language learning and teaching, but also to obtain new ideas and techniques that can be utilised in future lessons. An approach based on assumptions made about L2 listening processes and instruction can foster feelings of frustration, anxiety and demotivation among learners. Teachers should therefore be flexible and understand their learners' needs and be able to adapt teaching techniques to best suit their current teaching context. Through competent listening instruction, learners can gain not only the skills to comprehend and respond to spoken language, but also gain access to aural input. As Vandergrift (2004) points out, "students need to 'learn to listen' so that they can better 'listen to learn'" (p. 3).

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