

Building Listening Proficiency

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Abstract

There is broader agreement on the importance of listening than on how to teach it. Textbooks often focus on testing listening (e.g. comprehension): they assume listening skills have been acquired and provide opportunities for practising them. The teaching of listening, however, frequently emphasises listening strategies (e.g. pre-listening to prepare learners for what they are going to hear): students learn ways to apply their knowledge to new situations they encounter in L2 communication. Classroom materials that balance building listening proficiency with the need to test listening ability will be discussed, using *Listen to the World* (Palmer & Todd, 2007).

Introduction

The abstract draws the reader's attention to an area of acute concern in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory: whether learners through exposure to the L2 automatically use pre-existing L1 listening skills and apply the listening strategies that they know regardless of the method of instruction; or else whether they require a nudge in a certain direction in order to facilitate or speed up the learning process. One side asserts that an instructor is simply providing practice opportunities and follows a testing orientation, while the other emphasises awareness-raising and noticing of commonality between the L1 and L2 and therefore follows a teaching orientation together with a testing one. What is being attempted here is a synthesis (and possible reconciliation) of these two polarities as they are represented in the literature. The problem will be addressed by asking first just what is meant by a listening class. Is it something discrete and separate from an oral skills class, for example? Next, what are a set of good practices that can be used as a benchmark for the teaching of listening? Concrete examples are examined to show what is likely to succeed in the classroom. Finally, a checklist of areas to include in building students' listening proficiency is included in the appendix for reference. By covering the items listed in the appendices, the instructor should feel more confident that their learners are well-equipped to deal with listening challenges they face in the classroom as well as those encountered with English speakers in authentic communicative situations.

Rationale

Not every institution prioritises or separates listening in such a way as to provide focused

classes in that one skill. Putting aside designated listening classes, a 'speaking' class or an 'oral' class or a 'communication' class is rarely just concerned with speaking, despite the limitations of the class description. Needless to say, opaque or inadequate terminology may do a disservice to students if instruction in key skill areas is neglected, and this is particularly so in regard to the complex processes (receptive, active, top-down, bottom-up, etc.) at work in what we call listening. Research seems to indicate that reasonably fluent L2 speakers are not necessarily good listeners, and may have only partially mastered a range of listening skills and strategies normally considered to be at the disposal of a proficient communicator in the target language. As an instructor, when we measure (test) speaking ability it is likely that we are testing listening ability that has not been taught in our classes. Language comprehension involves a number of skills at the same time, and it is evident that listening relates to speaking, and vice versa. Under these conditions, it is highly desirable for an instructor to teach listening, as a communicative activity and/or as a language learning activity.

Activities

1. Is one way to practice listening better than any other?

Group 1 - Beginners

Group 2 - Intermediate

Group 3 - Advanced

Participants are placed into groups and asked to order the following six sample activities from 'most useful' to 'least useful' from the point of view of students.

Source: Oxford Language Teaching series

- a. Play a radio broadcast
- b. Pair work in which students tell each other about events in their lives
- c. Students follow teacher instructions, e.g. rearranging desks for a discussion
- d. Play the CD from the course book
- e. Teacher clarifies a language point for corrective feedback
- f. Teacher reads a story aloud

Feedback: In fact, there are several 'best' ways in the right context.

Stress the use of naturalistic language. Any of the activities can work if the task is graded to the level of the students. But how about 'teacher talk' or grading language to the level of the students? While grading language itself is less welcome than the grading of tasks, speakers are inclined to adjust their speech to the perceived level of the listener in all walks of life.

2. What are common reasons for selecting particular listening materials?

Examples: Not enough preparation time...

The exercises are in the book...

Sample reasons for selection of listening materials:

Survey of EFL teachers' satisfaction with listening materials

Source: Oxford Language Teaching series

Good for starting discussions

Can be used for self-access learning

Contains a variety of tasks

Entertaining

Easy to use

Practises guessing from context

Amusing

Uses authentic material

Consolidates language

Feedback: Interestingly, how many are specifically about listening? Zero, actually!

Does listening to one piece of language help learners to cope with others? This is the acid test.

Teacher talk? Language exposure? Tends to be less effective than a teaching approach.

Listening comprehension? Not bad, but beware "continuous testing."

Post-listening? Another testing (or measuring/checking) technique, far less effective than pre-listening strategies like prediction.

3. Sample listening comprehension exercise

Listen to the World (Palmer & Todd, 2007)

A teaching orientation entails a number of elements at the setting-up stage involving schema-building and activating scripts.

General:

The unit name is "Thailand";

A picture of a river and boats forming a floating market is provided for discussion and visual input. Ten key words and phrases in the book and on the self-study CD pre-teach the exercise.

Students practise saying the underlined phrases, and answer questions in the book using the

words in context to confirm comprehension and ownership of any unfamiliar terms.

Specific:

Learners are helped to do the task - which in this kind of multiple choice comprehension format involves skills such as sorting through information contained in the listening dialogue, disregarding the distractors, extracting the correct information, synthesising and processing the information where there are similar answers, and making sure it is the most accurate description contained.

Typical question:

There are 3 possible answers to Question 1 in Episode 10 (p.20), On the River, Listening Exercise A: 'Where do Sam and Lukas meet?' The choices 'on a bus' or 'on a river taxi' refer to transportation, whereas the other choice, 'swimming in the river' does not. The words swimming and river link with the heading of 'On the River', but are not an accurate description of their meeting. Other key information provided on the page is a half-page size picture of the two men sitting and talking on what looks like the inside of a boat carrying passengers. Words taught on the preceding page include 'meeting people' in the section under the word Thailand and a picture of boats on a river forming a floating market. In reference to the "specific" skills mentioned above, the listening task is made sufficiently challenging yet still achievable.

Lesson Plan

Lesson Planning suggestions:

Materials for teaching listening proficiency need to move on from the above comprehension exercise to others that provide comprehensible, focused input and purposeful listening to develop competence in particular listening abilities. Such materials assume a set of skills is not known and try to help the learner acquire them.

Typically, the kinds of abilities to consider might include:

sequencing;

filling in missing information;

identifying what is true and false (especially when more than just a memory check, i.e.

helping to develop the ability to grasp main ideas or extract relevant details);

following directions;

completing cloze exercises;

summarising.

Conclusion

1. A listening activity may assume a set of skills is (a) already acquired and provide opportunities for practising them (testing) or (b) not known and attempt to help the learner acquire them (teaching) e.g. through discussion, questions, or a short paragraph to read which creates the script, providing information about the situation, the characters and the events. Hence the amount of preparation the learner is given prior to a listening task gives a teaching rather than a testing focus to an activity.

2. Authenticity: to what extent does the input resemble natural language?

3. Content validity: Does the activity practice listening or general intelligence, etc.?

4. Listening comprehension or memory: Is the focus on information retrieval or on processing activities?

5. Purposefulness and comprehension: Does the activity reflect a purpose that approximates authentic real life listening?

The thrust of the argument in this paper has been that listening skills (such as sequencing and following directions) can and need to be taught like any others. These skills work in tandem with listening strategies (such as requesting repetition and clarification) which exist in the L1, but without conscious noticing are unlikely to be applied in the L2. It is particularly important that speaking tests are recognised as listening tests too, to avert the danger of testing what has not been taught. Global listening can be reciprocal (pair work in class or social chat outside) or non-reciprocal (listening to the radio); but note that global exposure to language, while useful, is not in itself enough. In the situation prevailing in many Asian countries where English is not used in daily life, there is no real substitute for structured teaching to help learners attain higher levels of listening proficiency.

References

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Appendix 1

Grading the text

Listener function - the purpose for listening

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. identification | 4. detail comprehension |
| 2. orientation | 5. full comprehension |
| 3. main idea comprehension | 6. replication |

Listening responses

. . . the tasks for the listener to carry out

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. doing | 6. extending |
| 2. choosing | 7. duplicating |
| 3. transferring | 8. modeling |
| 4. answering | 9. conversing |
| 5. condensing | |

Adapted from:

Hadley, A.O. (2001). *Teaching language in context* (3rd ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle

Appendix 2

Grading the task

Novice/Intermediate (extralinguistic support common)

Prelistening activities

Listening for the gist

Listening with visuals

Graphic fill-ins

Matching descriptions to pictures

Dictation and variations (familiar content, simple structures)

Clue searching (listening for cues to meaning, such as key words, syntactic features, actor/action/object, etc.)

Distinguishing registers (formal/informal style)

Kinesics/physical response

Recursive listening (listen to the same text several times; different purpose each time)

Inferential listening (drawing inferences not presented overtly in the text)

Paraphrase in native language

Completion of native language summary

Comprehension checks (various formats)

Remembering responses of others

Advanced/Superior (require fuller comprehension, detail, & understanding of nuances)

Dictation and variations (may include unfamiliar content, more complex structures)

Completing target language summary

Paraphrasing (target language)

Note taking/outlining

Summarising (native language/target language)

Recursive listening (multiple tasks)

Inferential listening (conclusions not presented overtly in the text)

Identifying sociolinguistic factors

Style shifting

Reaction/analysis activities

Creative elaboration activities

Adapted from:

Hadley, A.O. (2001). Teaching language in context (3rd ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle