

The Importance of Teaching Listening

Stephen Hattingh*

“Listening is very active. As people listen, they process not only what they hear but also connect it to other information they already know. Since listeners combine what they hear with their own ideas and experiences, in a very real sense they are ‘creating the meaning’ in their own minds” (Helgesen, 2003)

Abstract

This research paper is a review of current listening teaching practice and the support of this practice by research in second language acquisition. Current language teaching places a strong emphasis on the importance of *teaching* listening as compared to the minor role listening was given in previous approaches to language teaching. Furthermore, prominent researchers in language teaching are beginning to suggest that as important as developing listening as a skill is, listening for acquisition is also a goal to be considered in the language classroom. This review hopes to provide language teachers with the knowledge necessary to make a sound assessment of a listening activity based on SLA research and current teaching practice.

Keywords

teaching listening, listening comprehension, acquisition through listening

Introduction

The current view of listening rejects the past language teaching dichotomy of passive and active language skills that assigned listening its passive status. In recent decades with the increased focus on the theory and practice of listening comprehension, listening comprehension has been elevated to status equal to that of the other language skills. There is now a greater understanding of the nature of listening and the value to the language learner of developing effective listening strategies for both comprehension *and* language acquisition. In the practice of teaching listening, many widely used commercial

*Stephen Hattingh : 大阪国際大学ビジネス学部准教授 (2013.9.25受理)

textbooks incorporate language principles extracted from SLA research and theory. A language teacher can confidently teach from a well authored text by simply following the teacher's guide and the activities as outlined in the student workbook. It could be considered a "paint-by-numbers" approach to teaching listening. A more responsible approach is for the language teacher to be familiar with the current insights on the skill of listening and to work from a set of teaching principles informed by SLA research and theory. An added advantage would be the confidence a teacher would have to either adapt textbook activities or design listening activities suitable to the needs of his or her students with the knowledge that he or she is following sound teaching practice.

This paper will review the most current literature on teaching listening. Beginning with a brief overview of approaches to listening up until the present, the paper first discusses why listening is now considered so important to language development. A review of the current theory of the listening comprehension process from second language acquisition research and the resulting approach to teaching listening comprehension is made. This paper highlights the important realization that listening instruction should be for listening comprehension, determining the meaning of the message, and that the language content of the listening input can potentially afford the language learner with opportunities for language acquisition. Finally, this paper hopes to outline the pedagogical principles a teacher needs to apply when teaching listening.

Background to the teaching of listening

In comparison with the other language skills, listening went unnoticed until recently. Little SLA research or EFL classroom time was given to listening in language courses even though research demonstrated that almost half of the time adults spent in communication constituted listening (Gilman & Moody, 1984). As the skill of listening in language learning was taken for granted, research into listening comprehension was not deemed necessary for many years. The attention given to listening followed language teaching methods which were influenced by developments in various other fields of study such as education, anthropology, linguistics and psychology. For example, in the field of anthropology, the study of speech and world languages was the basis on which American applied linguists, taking a behaviourist approach, developed the audiolingual method in which listening featured more in language learning than in previous grammar-translation methods (Rost, 2001). In this approach, listening had a limited role of supporting speech; learners listened to repeat with the aim to improve their pronunciation. Language learning was in essence an intensive program with the intent to formulate a pattern of new behavior. Building on the premise of meaning as being provided by both linguistic context and non-linguistic understanding of a situation, Firth (1957) developed the Situational approach. The Natural approach grew from the work of Chomsky (1965)

and is based on the concept of an internal grammar on which the learner constructs the target language from L2 data input. The Total Physical Response method, drawing on Krashen's theory of comprehensible input, took the stage for a while in the 1980's (Asher, 1988), giving listening a central role at the beginning stages of learning. It was only in the Communicative approach, listening began to be viewed as a language skill integral to communication but only as a passive skill. Later classroom activities focused on information accuracy in listening activities and more recently listening to complete task based activities (Morley, 1999). Applied linguists began to define listening (see Long, 1985, Pica 1994) and recognized it as a primary source of language input and a trigger for acquisition (Rost, 1990). Current teaching practice now views developing the skill of listening as a significant goal in any language teaching course (Brown, 2001). Listening practice now focuses on the mental process of listening and the teaching of listening as the successful application of multiple listening strategies (Hinkel, 2006). Language teachers need to implement a significant amount of listening in any language course and impress on the learner that listening is an active skill that requires the application of various strategies.

Why is teaching listening so important?

In an about turn from initial teaching practice, it is now recognized that the language learning environment whether for L1 or L2, is heavily dependent on listening. Rost (2002a) notes that of the three major conditions required for one to learn a language: realizing the need for the L2 and being motivated; interacting with native speakers who are willing to provide the learner with accessible language and learning support; and frequent interaction in the target language in a variety of social settings, - listening plays an essential role in two of the conditions. Further support for the teaching of listening is rooted in the theory of second language acquisition which has brought attention to comprehensible listening as a key element in language learning (Krashen, 1982). Language exposure through listening is a valuable source of language input, the better the listener, the greater the potential for language development. Rost (1994) gives three reasons indicating the importance of listening proficiency (and thus the teaching of it) when it comes to the skill of speaking:

- 1) Language interaction is vital for learning. The learner needs to interact in the L2 to get language input, to either understand it or fail to understand it for learning to begin.
- 2) The learner needs to hear and understand authentic spoken language.
- 3) Through listening exercises, teachers can draw the learner's attention to new forms in the language and thus promote language acquisition (pp. 141-142).

These three reasons can serve as the basis for designing or modifying a listening task.

Researchers have shown that the development of listening comprehension has a beneficial impact on the other three language skills. SLA research has shown the correlation between listening ability and other language skills (Feyten 1991; Pearson and Fielding, 1991). Further to this, based on current SLA theory with regard to listening as a) a language input source and b) listening activities as a means to focus the learner's attention, a distinction can be made between listening for *comprehension* and listening for *language acquisition*. Listening is now recognized as central to the development of second language competence for the integral role it could play in second language acquisition (Richards, 2005). Rost (2002) supports this current view with the contention that the primary goal of L2 listening development is to support L2 acquisition through listening. This suggests that language teachers need to consider language acquisition as their teaching goals when doing a listening exercise.

Aside from the importance of listening comprehension to the overall development of language, teachers need to respond to the needs of the language learner. L2 learners are motivated to improve listening driven by a desire to access to social media. Listening is the most frequently used academic skill and a requirement for students wishing to study abroad. Thus, it is a skill required to gain a respectable score on any of the international language tests and a stepping stone to their future. In the language classroom, reticent students may feel less pressure and anxiety if, at least in the early stages of language learning, there is less emphasis on speaking. Teachers may find that the motivation for learning may be bolstered when the students feel released from immediately having to do lots of speaking. They might feel more comfortable and motivated in a class that has a strong complement of listening activities. Language teachers need to recognize the importance of listening for its role in language learning and the confidence it gives the beginner learner.

What is understood about the listening comprehension process?

What L1 speakers do naturally without much thought or attention when listening, is an onerous task for L2 language learners who struggle to grasp meaning from the incoming stream of speech. The most arduous feature of listening is that as it occurs in real time, there is no option of review. Depending on the similarities to their L1, L2 learners may have difficulties interpreting the sounds, stress patterns and semantic features of the target language. For example, the difference in the stress systems in English and Japanese make it difficult for Japanese learners of English to identify key words in spoken English. To become competent listeners, it is necessary for L2 learners to have ample listening practice, be taught to parse the signal and master the conscious use of strategies for listening. What they do subconsciously in their L1, they will have to perform *consciously* in L2 listening. It is the role of the language teacher to teach and

train his or her students in these strategies for listening.

Listening is a complex process made difficult most of all by its impermanence, but also by the use of pitch, loudness, tempo, and rhythm in speech to convey the information and meaning of an utterance and by the need for immediate assimilation, processing and response (Lynch & Mendelshon, 2002). Listening is more accurately defined as a conscious, *active* mental process whereby the listener, while relying on multiple strategic resources, constructs meaning from contextual information cues and existing knowledge (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Rost (2002) further qualifies listening as an application of the listener's linguistic knowledge and world knowledge to create a mental representation of what is being heard and in doing so the listener makes use of *both*, bottom up and top down processes to construct meaning. For the listener, listening is not simply a unidirectional passive process of receiving what the speaker says but requires interaction with and engagement of the speaker to negotiate, clarify and determine meaning (Brown, 2001). In a review of a 130 second language listening comprehension research studies, Rubin (1994), determined that text characteristics, interlocutor characteristics, listener characteristics, task characteristics and listening process characteristics were the main factors affecting listening.

Top down and bottom up processing are the two prominent and well established models of listening comprehension. The bottom up process model of listening assumes the decoding of the incoming input occurs hierarchically. Decoding begins with the smallest meaningful language unit (phonemes) and progresses gradually combining increasingly larger units to complete meaningful utterances, the listener sources phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic knowledge to construct meaning based on the message. Conversely, in the top down process model, the listener is depending on knowledge of the context and the situation in which the listening takes place to make sense of what is being heard. The listener actively reconstructs the original meaning from prior information about the relationship between the speaker(s) and listener and their connection to the situation, from knowledge of the topic at hand and from prior knowledge (topic, genre, culture and schema knowledge) in the long term memory.

Listening comprehension is an interactive, interpretive process with listeners resourcing as needed both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge. While it is generally agreed that the top down and bottom up processes interact "in some form of parallel distributed processing" (Vandergrift, 2004), the degree to which either process is applied is determined by the listener's linguistic knowledge and familiarity with the topic. From common knowledge, listeners have expectations of what is about to be heard. Decoding of the sounds of a word may not be necessary if the word is known and the learner has an existing knowledge of its meaning and associations. The listening purpose, interactional (small talk, casual conversation) or transactional (news broadcasts, lectures)

will also dictate the type of processing (Richards, 1990). For example, if listening for gist is the purpose, primarily top down processing is used. If it is for specific information from an announcement, bottom up processing is primarily used to comprehend the details (Vandergrift, 2003). Listeners with a weak linguistic base will have a limited bottom up processing ability and will have to rely heavily on top down processing, as may be the case where they may not know the meaning of a grammatical structure or vocabulary (Field 2008). With little conscious attention, native speakers are able to process aural input automatically and efficiently, whereas the L2 listener needs to *consciously* focus on the listening input, has to compensate for limitations of linguistic knowledge, and make use of all available resources to interpret what is being heard. How well this can be done, will determine the degree of listening success. Students need instruction in both bottom up and top down strategies to develop their listening skill.

Research into what skilled L2 listeners do when listening provides some insight into how listeners apply these processes and it is from these studies that the importance of strategies to L2 listening success emerges (Vandergrift, 2003a; Goh, 2008). To assist in comprehension and to make their learning more effective, learners use cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are the application or manipulation of the listening material to assist in listening (e.g. note-taking). Socio-affective strategies refer to the listener's ways to clarify understanding, their effort to interact and to reduce anxiety. Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition in doing such things as paying attention, planning for language tasks, self-evaluation and error monitoring. It is the L2 learner, regulating and directing the listening process. Research reveals that skilled listeners tend to adopt more strategies than less-skilled listeners (O' Mally & Chamot, 1990; Griffith 2000), they used twice as many metacognitive strategies as less-skilled listeners (Vandergrift 2003a) and skilled listeners used effective combinations of cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Goh 2002). Less skilled listeners, had greater difficulty with word segmentation in real time (Goh, 2002) and missed chunks of text, they did not recognize words, struggled with speech rate and pronunciation recognition. All of which are listening difficulties associated with an over dependence on bottom up processing (Hasan, 2000). The research shows that learners of both higher-levels and lower-levels use strategies when listening but it varies in ability.

Chamot (1995) notes that explicit instruction in the value and purpose of learning strategies will have a positive effect on listening comprehension. When listeners *know* how to analyze the listening task requirement, employ the appropriate listening processes, make appropriate predictions, monitor their comprehension and evaluate their success, then they are effectively using metacognitive knowledge for successful listening comprehension. Application and self-regulation of metacognitive skills not only in the classroom but outside, is a critical step towards being an independent language

learner. Fundamental to having a sound pedagogy of L2 listening comprehension, is having knowledge of these processes and knowing how, at different levels of language proficiency and in varying contexts, they contribute to comprehension. In communication, the speaker of the target language makes adjustments to accommodate the L2 learner, just as the L2 learner uses strategies to make speech comprehensible. The language teacher needs to design listening activities that will orient and assist the students in the task and train the students to effectively apply various metacognitive strategies. Most importantly L2 learners need to be made aware that listening is a conscious and active process.

Approaches to teaching listening comprehension

After defining taxonomies of strategies used by learners, research has directed attention to effective teaching of strategies and the examination of the relationship between strategies and language proficiency (Chamot, 2005). Although there are some researchers who question the need for actively teaching strategies (Rubin, 1994), the conclusion of much of the research is there is a benefit to the student (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). See Rubin, (1994) for a discussion on the importance of learner training in the listening classroom.

Current classroom listening comprehension teaching materials make use of a variety of strategies and techniques in listening activities: prediction, identifying key words and ignoring irrelevant words, activation of background knowledge for selective listening and keeping the gist of text in mind while listening. This approach is predicated on the assumption that the goal of listening comprehension is to extract the message. To this end, listeners need to be taught top down and bottom up processes to derive understanding of the message and that once the meaning has been extracted, there is no need to retain the form of the language utterance (Richards, 2005a).

Rost (2001, p.11) gives the following instruction for the teaching of listening which requires the careful selection of input sources which should be: appropriately authentic, interesting, varied and challenging. The teacher needs to carefully design the task to activate the learner's own knowledge and experiences and to afford them the opportunity to monitor what they are doing. The task should be designed to help the learners effectively employ listening strategies (metacognitive, cognitive and social). A well designed task will integrate listening with other purposes that may involve the other language skills (reading, writing and speaking).

A top down approach to the teaching of listening will attempt to raise the learner's metacognitive awareness of listening (Berne, 2004). A listening task designed on the listening process will engage the learner in predicting, monitoring, evaluating and problem solving and engage the learner in the use of metacognitive skills important for

the development of listening.

A teacher designing a listening lesson will generally follow this lesson plan:

- pre-listening (to establish context, activate schemata and motivate)
- extensive listening (questions to establish the general situation)
- pre-set task/questions
- extensive listening
- review of the task/questions
- inference of new vocabulary or examination of functional language

This plan reflects the current view of listening comprehension. Listening is a skill and is to be focused on rather than the language content of the message. Classroom listening activities should match real life listening for maximum benefit to the learner. Providing a contextual framework, emphasizing the importance of inferring the meaning of unknown vocabulary, using authentic materials and materials with conversational features, and making use of simulated tasks are employed to replicate the nature of listening. Questions and tasks are used to ensure the learners have a clear listening purpose and do not have to heavily depend on memory. To provide motivation and focus for listening, learners are encouraged to predict what they will hear and then confirm it against what was actually said (Field, 1998). Vandergrift (2004) notes that a strategy based approach can work even with beginners. It builds their confidence and raises their awareness of the listening process and guides them in effective combinations of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in real life listening.

As important as it is for L2 listeners to bring their world knowledge to the listening task, Field (2003) notes that there has been an overemphasis on the top down approach to teaching listening. There is a need for the teaching of bottom up processing skill. In referring to the importance of the signal, he emphasizes the need to focus on “what English sounds like to the non-native listener” (p.325). In order to quickly recognize words, instruction in parsing the listening input is paramount to successful listening. Learners need word segmentation skills, a bottom up processing skill. Research into the automatization of word recognitions skills suggests that it is critical to successful listening (Segalowitz & Segalowitz, 1993). Hulstijin (2003) argues that for word segmentation skills development, listeners need to build up their “acoustic, phonemic, syllabic, morphological and lexical information” (p. 422). He outlines a six step process which requires the learner to puzzle out the differences in what is heard in a recording and what is actually said. The learners will listen to a recording numerous times and confirm what they believe to be the content of the message. Then they listen again while reading a script and note any differences. After an examination of the reasons for any discrepancies, they listen again,

this time paying attention to the causes of the differences in their initial listening attempt. This bottom up listening training will focus the learner's attention on phenomena common to connected speech such as reduced form, assimilation, elision, resyllabification and cliticization. By focusing on their errors and the reasons for them, L2 listeners can improve their perceptual processing when listening. Most listening activities in language textbooks have a top down processing listening focus. It is possible to use the exercise but with bottom up processing teaching goal in the way Hulstijn suggests.

It is insufficient for the language teacher to simply work through the listening activities in a text without teaching his or her students how to listen or to not respond to the failure in the learner's listening as represented by task errors. Field (1998) notes that the teaching of listening has become more sensitive to student needs but still does not adequately train the learner in listening. Brown (1986) points out that the current methodology of teaching listening is inadequate in that it although it offers exposure to listening, it gives no instruction in the listening skill. There is a gap in what research has revealed about the importance of metacognitive knowledge and classroom practice which does very little to instruct and develop the learner's metacognitive skills (Mendelsohn, 1998). With the current product focus in listening activities, little is done to improve the effectiveness of the learner's listening or deal with any problems the learner had in the listening exercise. Listening accuracy is measured by the number of correct answers on the listening exercises and corrective instruction is given regard to the meaning of the text and the language content but there is no examination of the listening process to determine cause for the student's listening failure. With no repair, the listener is most likely to use the same inadequate strategies with no possibility of future improvement (Field, 1988). If the aim of the teacher is to teach listeners how to listen, teaching instruction must focus on the listening process rather than the product. This change in focus will have the important effect of shifting responsibility of learning from the teacher to the student and thus will enable the student to become a self-regulated learner (Vandergrift, 2003). Students need to be able to actively select appropriate combinations of metacognitive strategies when faced with a listening task. Field (2003) suggests that teachers can gain insight from learners' incorrect answers in listening exercises and through a diagnostic approach help less skilled learners close the gaps in their understanding (see Field 2003 for a detailed description of how to adopt this approach). Vandergrift (2004) outlines a 7 stage instruction cycle and identifies the metacognitive skills that need to be applied at each stage. He recommends this approach as a successful means to help beginner level students learn how to listen. (see appendix 1).

Using listening for acquisition

It is agreed that listening is the main source of the target language for the learner and

that it has a role in facilitating language development. The approach taken in language learning is to improve listening comprehension so that the learner may get the best benefit from the available input and language acquisition can take its course. In the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), postulates that a learner can only advance his or her language development when the input contains linguistic items slightly advanced of the learner's current stage in development ($i + 1$). Krashen's theory is that comprehensible language at the learner's level is most likely to become 'intake' i.e. language data that can be assimilated and advance the learner's interlanguage. Commonly, not all input readily becomes intake. In a study of French immersion students (Swain, 1985), it was demonstrated that although learners could achieve native-like comprehension, despite the intensity of the immersion program, the language proficiency and accuracy was not at native speaker level. Schmidt (1990) asserts that conscious attention to language features is how comprehensible input is converted to intake, and is necessary for the incorporation of new linguistic features and the emergence of them in the learner's speech (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). It is clear that hearing alone i.e. comprehension, does not ensure language learning i.e. acquisition. SLA theory accepts that there is a distinction between the processing for comprehension and acquisition (Sun, 2008). Comprehensible input and noticing are the conditions that are conducive to language acquisition but it is only through the process of restructuring, where the learner actually tries to internalize and place the intake data into his or her interlanguage (VanPatten 1993) and to use it in his or her output, testing and experimenting with it (Tarone and Lui, 1995), that language acquisition potentially advances.

Teachers should incorporate this role of listening in their classroom. A distinction can be made when the instructional goal of the listening is only for the development of comprehension (listening encounters where the purpose is primarily the extraction of information) and where the instructional goal is both comprehension and acquisition (where listening is a component of a speaking course). The listening activity cycle would broadly be a "two-part cycle of activities... a comprehension phase and an acquisition phase" (Richards, 2005, p. 5). The former would focus on the extraction of meaning and the latter would consist of noticing and restructuring activities (Richards, 2005, 2005a). Similarly, Rost (2005), in a discussion on listening task design, offers four principles as a guideline. The fourth principle is to "build steps into activities that enhance language awareness" (p. 21). The proposed idea is that listening tasks be designed to explicitly draw the learner's attention to language items and in this way spur the development of language. For learners, especially beginners, the main objective of listening is to at all costs establish meaning. Often burdened by the characteristics of listening, they may not notice salient language features. It is only advanced learners, who have graduated to a level of language proficiency, who may begin to naturally notice and pay attention to

features of language in the input. This is the natural result of an advanced listening skill. Thus the task falls to the teacher to incorporate in listening activities the opportunity to focus on and note language features. L2 learners should also be made aware that their language development will advance quicker with attention to salient features in the input. Learners equipped with this awareness of language learning can sooner take control and self-regulate their learning. Teachers though, need to be aware that the task design is important as students may quickly become bored with listening tasks that are grammar based.

Conclusion:

Listening in the classroom need not be limited to listening comprehension, but the teacher should have an awareness of the essential role it can play in language acquisition. Teaching materials need to be modified to assist language acquisition rather than just having a goal of listening comprehension and metacognitive strategies development. Both the teacher and the student need to recognize that listening is a complex skill that needs to be consciously developed. Teachers need to be aware of the metacognitive strategies on which the learner is dependent. Learners need to be aware that conscious application of metacognitive strategies is vital to successful listening and consequently, they need to work on mastering these skills. Teachers must provide classroom listening practice that will focus the learner's attention on these important metacognitive skills and give them ample training and practice so that they will become natural. Using metacognitive skills will help the L2 listener compensate for gaps in listening and achieve success in listening but bottom up exercises should be employed by the teacher to focus on aspects of speech that make hearing a challenge. Teachers can use the listening activity to foster opportunities for language acquisition, but it is the student who should actively use the listening input to advance his or her language development. It is the responsibility of the teacher to develop the learners' awareness of this and to encourage them to take charge of their language development. The learner has to be an active participant in listening, both for comprehension and acquisition.

Appendix 1

Listening Instruction Stages and Related Metacognitive Strategies

Stage of Listening Instruction	Related Metacognitive Strategies
<p>Planning/predicting stage</p> <p>1. Once students know the topic and text type, they predict types of information and possible words they may hear.</p>	<p>1. Planning and directed attention</p>
<p>First verification</p> <p>2. Students verify initial hypotheses, correct as required, and note additional information understood.</p> <p>3. Students compare what they have written with peers, modify as required, establish what needs resolution and decide on details that still need special attention.</p>	<p>2. Monitoring</p> <p>3. Monitoring, planning and selective attention.</p>
<p>Second verification</p> <p>4. Students verify points of disagreement, make corrections, and write down additional details understood.</p> <p>5. Class discussion in which all contribute to reconstruction of the text's main points and most pertinent details, interspersed with reflections on how students arrived at the meaning of certain words or parts of the text.</p>	<p>4. Monitoring and problem solving</p> <p>5. Monitoring and evaluation</p>
<p>Final verification</p> <p>6. Students listen for information that they could not decipher earlier in the class discussion.</p>	<p>6. Selective attention and monitoring</p>
<p>Reflection stage</p> <p>7. Based on discussion of strategies used to compensate for what was not understood, students write goals for next listening activity.</p>	<p>7. Evaluation</p>

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