Listening to English as
a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This paper considers various theoretical aspects of EFL listening and practical implications for the teacher.

Models of the listening process

Listening to extended discourse is a very complex process. Early models regarded it as a serial or linear process of decoding: the listener recognizes phonemes, then syllables, then words, then phrases and finally understands whole utterances. This view has been disproved by researchers such as Pollack and Pickett (1963) and Liberman (1970) and replaced by a model which closely resembles the interactive reading models developed by Rumelhart (1977), Sanford and Garrod (1981) and others.

According to the current paradigm, listening is an interactive process in which incoming language data is processed 'bottom-up' using linguistic knowledge (of lexis, syntax and phonology) and 'top-down' using non-linguistic knowledge (about the situation, speaker, subject, and so on). The importance of top-down processing becomes clear if we consider the fact that speech is delivered at up to 25 phonemes per second (Liberman et al. 1967) - far beyond the limited capacity of a 'bottom-up' processing mode alone - and that perception and comprehension are impaired by the problems explained below.

With such rapid input to process, short term memory plays a crucial role. It is thought that incoming sounds are first organized into meaningful units in the 'echoic memory', drawing on the listener's knowledge of syntax, lexis and phonology; after this, the information is processed by the short-term memory; then it is immediately

transferred to the long-term memory to make room for the next set of incoming data. (Underwood, 1989:2). Since the short term memory has a limit of eight or nine units, it is necessary for phonemic data to be converted to meaningful 'chunks' first, hence the theoretical concept of the echoic memory.

Aspects of listening

Our processing model came from psycholinguistics. The following analysis, however, is derived primarily from discourse analysis.

One of the many aspects of listening which influence what actually happens is the role of the listener. We often listen as participants in a conversation. In such 'collaborative listening' situations, we are able to negotiate meaning with the speaker, asking for clarification, repetition, confirmation, and so on. Depending on our response (or facial expression), the speaker may modify his or her speech rate and choice of words to make the message more easily understandable. Collaborative listeners are also under an obligation to respond appropriately. Responses include head movements, 'backchannelling' ("Oh", "Mm", "Yeah?" etc.) and note-taking, as well as the ten categories of listener feedback given by Ginsberg (1986) for interactive listening. Lund (1990), in his detailed taxonomy for listening, lists nine categories of response: doing, choosing, transferring, answering, condensing, extending, duplicating, modelling and conversing. In addition to being participants in a dialogue, we also listen as members of an audience (e.g. at a lecture) or as eavesdroppers (e.g. on a train). In such cases, we cannot negotiate meaning with the speaker but are not expected to respond verbally.

We also have various reasons for listening. Galvin (1985) lists five: (a) to engage in social rituals (b) to exchange information (c) to exert control (d) to share feelings and (e) to enjoy yourself. Our reason for listening influences both our attentional level and our response. If we are eavesdropping just to pass the time, our attentional level will be very low, perhaps just sufficient to pick up the gist (i.e. global listening). If we are listening for specific information, such as the platform from which our train will leave, we will 'tune out' irrelevant information and then listen carefully when a word or phrase signals that important information is coming (i.e. selective listening). If we are listening for study purposes just before a major test, we may listen very carefully to everything that is said.

Another major factor which influences listening performance is the style of the utterance. This may be placed somewhere on a continuum from perfectly memorised to

completely spontaneous. The more spontaneous it is, the more likely it is that the speaker will make mistakes and repairs, false starts and modifications, features of natural spoken English which tend to confound the learner. The style of speech also ranges from formal to informal, depending on the situation and the relationship between the speaker and the listener(s). There are also various types of speakers, according to Brown and Bakhtar (1983). 'Visual speakers' lecture with detailed notes and blackboard diagrams; 'exemplary speakers' emphasize main ideas and repeat main points; 'oral lecturers' define their terms carefully; 'amorphous speakers' lack clear structure and often abandon their original aim; and 'eclectic speakers' speak freely and often stray from the subject. It would be interesting to determine whether different speaking styles favour different types of learner and to establish which style is most helpful to the greatest number of learners. This should not affect our approach to the teaching of listening, however, since students must be able to adapt to all styles of lecturing. The style may determine the level of difficulty for the learner, with spontaneous, informal speech being the most problematic.

Other factors relating to difficulty will be discussed in the following section.

Sources of difficulty

Even native speakers experience listening problems frequently. These may be attributed to (a) delivery factors, (b) message factors, (c) listener factors and (d) external factors. Delivery factors are those for which the speaker is responsible: speech which is too rapid, inaudible or incoherent; utterances which are too long and pauses which are too short; and non-standard accents. Message factors refer to what the speaker says, and include the following:

(i) complex structures such as double-embedded clauses

　　e.g. Meeting the writer whose book, which I read twice, was awarded this year's Pullitzer Prize was a stimulating experience.

(ii) multiple negatives

　　e.g. His failure to deny the charge of incompetence was not unexpected.

(iii) vague or profound concepts

　　e.g. 'You' is the universe looking at itself from billions of points of view.

(iv) floating pronouns

　　e.g. My brother couldn't see the doctor because he was too busy.

(v) unfamiliar words, jargon, acronyms, etc.

　　Listener factors refer to the listener's lack of relevant knowledge, poor hearing,

lack of concentration or interest, and so on. External factors include background noise and interruption.

In addition to the above factors, foreign language listeners have particular difficulty with the following problems related to the phonological features of natural spoken English

1) Input comes as strings of sound with no word boundaries.

　e.g. He can find them/He confined them.

2) Many sounds are similar.

　e.g. He's getting along. He's getting a lawn. He's getting a loan.

3) Some words or phrases with different meanings sound exactly the same.

　e.g. The doctor had a lot of patience. The doctor had a lot of patients.

4) Many auxiliaries are contracted.

　e.g. He'd (=would) be there. He'd (=had) been there.

5) Some vowel sounds are reduced.

　e.g. The chick(e)n's in th(e) ov(e)n.

6) Many consonants are deleted in certain environments.

　e.g. Wat(ch) shops are closed. (= What shops are closed?)

7) Many sounds are ellided.

　e.g. I 'spect 'e'll come 'n' ask us. (= I expect he'll come and ask us)

8) /t/ and /d/ sounds are frequently 'flapped'.

　e.g. inner-cidy (= inter-city)

9) Juncture with glottalised /t/ is inaudible.

　e.g. Her da(te) was ruined vs. Her day was ruined.

10) Meaning may depend on intonation.

　e.g. Sorry. (= I apologise.) Sorry? (= Could you say that again?)

11) Meaning may depend on syllable stress.

　e.g. Can you telephone from a fax machine? Can you tell a phone from a fax machine?

All of the above problems are unique to listening. There are also various discourse problems, such as ellipsis (e.g. Going to the concert tonight?) and irony, cultural problems (e.g. references to events, people and customs the listener has never heard of) and, inevitably, linguistic problems.

Skills and strategies

Our interactive model, in which the listener uses linguistic knowledge to chunk

incoming strings of sounds, knowledge about the subject and the context in order to approximate the propositional content and 3 levels of memory in order to retain input during and after processing, explains the overall listening process, but not how the proficient listener differs from the poor listener. Linguistic knowledge is naturally a key factor. Listeners also differ, however, in their use of skills and strategies. Better listeners employ a wider range of skills and strategies and use them more appropriately.

What exactly are listening skills and strategies? Skills are simply abilities to do each of the many things that a listener needs to do. They may be categorized in various ways: e.g. linear decoding (i.e. bottom-up) and schema-based (i.e. top-down) processing skills; phonological, lexical, syntactic and discourse processing skills; decoding, interpreting and interacting skills; and so on. Perhaps the best theoretical analysis of skills is in Rost (1990:150-153), despite the author's stated distrust of skill taxonomies. Rost categorizes listening skills in hierarchical clusters consisting of a general skill and a number of sub-skills. These are presented as skills emphasizing perception, skills emphasizing interpretation and enacting skills.

Rost's analysis is of great value to the researcher but of questionable relevance to the teacher and syllabus designer. If we wish to train our students to deal with the phonological problems listed above (Sources of Difficulty), we need to focus on the appropriate coping skills, which may be described as follows: 1. separating unbroken strings of sound into meaningful chunks; 2. distinguishing between similar sounds; 3. determining the meaning of a homophone from the context; 4. recognizing contracted forms; 5. recognizing reduced vowel sounds; 6. recovering deleted consonants; 7. restoring ellided phonemes; 8. recognizing flapped /t/ and /d/ sounds; 9. recognizing glottalized /t/ sounds; 10. using intonation to interpret meaning; 11. using syllable stress to identify word boundaries. Activities focusing on each of the processing problems and related skills listed above can easily be designed and have proven to be very useful. Richards (1983) lists a number of other skills for which training activities could probably be designed.

In reading theory, strategies are generally regarded as cognitive processes which facilitate understanding and compensate for non-understanding. They are equally relevant to listening. As Peaty and Susser (1991) explain, "listening strategies are needed in order to make the task easier, enhance performance (i.e., accuracy), and compensate for problems such as unfamiliar lexis, accents, background noise, and so on". The term 'strategies', however, is somewhat misleading, given the speed with which input is processed; the term 'cognitive processes' might be more appropriate.

The most commonly mentioned are prediction, inference and hypothesis testing. When we hear the words "I'm hungry. Let's ...", we predict that the speaker will say something related to eating, food or restaurants. If the next word is interrupted or a word with which we are unfamiliar, we can still process the chunk, using our prediction. If the speaker uses a word we don't know, we can usually guess its meaning from the context.

Rost (1990:156-157) has a different concept of strategies. "Conscious strategies to bring more of a language event into focus are the means by which listeners maximize their performance." He sees strategies as movements from one listening orientation to another. For example, movement from trying to attend to and represent one proposition to attending to more than one proposition is seen as a helpful strategy. Many of his eleven strategies could be expressed as advice to the learner; but it is difficult to see how learning tasks could be designed around them. For the purposes of instruction, the traditional concepts of skills and strategies would seem to be more appropriate.

Implications for instruction

A good summary of goals of a listening program is to be found in Rost (1990: 153) : "Formal instruction in listening should aim both to present learners with increasingly challenging listening texts and pedagogic tasks and to induce the learner to resolve points of non-understanding and misunderstanding". To this, we can add a basic framework consisting of the following elements: increasing syntactic and lexical knowledge (particularly of idioms, cliches and other common 'pre-fabricated chunks') ; teaching the entire phonological system of English (vowels, diphthongs, consonants and suprasegmentals) ; raising awareness of the natural features of spoken English (strings of sounds, contraction, reduction, flapping, and so on) and the resultant problems; teaching key aspects of discourse (ellipsis, reference, irony, and so on) ; teaching the main skills and strategies; teaching students to vary their attention levels (global, selective and careful listening) ; teaching students how to negotiate meaning (asking for repetition, clarification or confirmation) ; and training them by means of appropriate tasks to the point at which relevant knowledge, skills and strategies are applied spontaneously.

This implies a very substantial programme. Some elements could and should be taught in a combined oral/aural skills course: teaching students how to negotiate meaning, for example. Students could feasibly study English syntax in their native

language from a grammar book and expand their aural vocabulary by reading books at the appropriate level and then listening to them being read aloud by native speakers. (Many graded readers, as well as unsimplified novels and plays, are accompanied by cassettes.) The bulk of what the students will need to master, however, must be presented and learned by means of a systematic, task-based listening programme.

Our syllabus would consist of two types of tasks: learning or awareness-raising tasks and training or familiarizing tasks. The tasks would be sequenced progressively in terms of difficulty, with learning tasks preceding training tasks. In grading tasks according to difficulty, we have to take into account not only the language content but also many other factors, including the following.

1) Delivery (volume, speech rate, length and frequency of pauses, clarity of enunciation, etc.)

2) Style (prepared or spontaneous, formal or informal, etc.)

3) Rhetorical structure (narrative, expository or descriptive; concrete or abstract; etc.)

4) Content (degree of familiarity or predictability; degree of background knowledge assumed by the speaker)

5) Quality of discourse (explicit, ambiguous, vague, inconsistent; with plenty of redundancy or lacking essential information; number of pronouns; etc)

6) Processing load and length

7) Outcome (learner's objective), type of response required and time available

8) Number of different speakers and similarity of voices

9) Level of background noise; frequency of interruption

10) Amount of support provided before listening (e.g.explanation of context) and while listening (e.g. outline)

11) Whether or not collaboration with peers is allowed

12) The amount of help provided by the teacher on request

13) Whether or not the situation allows negotiation of meaning.

Because of the wide range of factors involved, grading according to difficulty often depends ultimately on priorities.

Texts would include live speech (spontaneous or scripted) by the teacher and guest speakers as well as audio and video recordings. Teachers should feel no obligation to use 'authentic' recordings until the final stages of the programme, for the following reasons.

(1) For inauthentic listeners (i.e. people other than those for whom the message was originally intended) who lack access to the original context (and are thus deprived of

the cues of preceding discourse, facial expressions, gestures, etc.) and who are listening under inauthentic conditions (such as reduced sound quality, no opportunity to negotiate meaning with the speaker, and so on), trying to understand an 'authentic' utterance is much more difficult than it was for the original listeners. Expecting foreign language learners to understand 'authentic' speech under such inauthentic conditions is thus unreasonable and likely to harm motivation.

(2) It is very difficult to select from 'authentic' recordings clear excerpts which are appropriate for specific pedagogical goals focusing on a particular skill, strategy or phonological feature. If the learner is forced to attend to a wide range of problems simultaneously, the intended focus will be lost.

On the other hand, more advanced learners do need to become accustomed to listening to genuine native-speaker discourse and to be exposed to a wide range of accents and speaking styles when they are ready for this; and the latter part of a progressively difficult listening programme should provide plenty of tasks designed with these needs in mind, together with the need to offset the additional burden created by the lack of authenticity of listener and situation.

It is generally assumed that video recordings are more effective than audio recordings in a listening programme because of the elaborate contextual cues which they provide and because they tend to be more interesting to students. Takai (1991), however, claims that the disadvantages of video (he lists nine) outweigh the advantages, and his research data confirms that a programme based on audio recordings leads to greater improvment than one based on video recordings.

It must be emphasized that the most authentic classroom listening experiences are those in which the teacher is communicating with the students in natural English. Teachers should never hesitate to digress from the lesson plan in order to tell an anecdote, express an opinion or discuss a personal experience when the opportunity arises.

For a detailed discussion of task design, please see Rost (1990: 158-172). Anderson and Lynch (1988: 97-112) and Ur (1984: Chapters 4 and 5) also provide a thorough analysis with actual examples of listening tasks.

The role of the teacher in a task-based listening programme is to introduce and explain each task, along with its pedagogical goal, and to provide support or feedback where necessary at each of the three stages (pre-, while- and post-listening).

When students have difficulty (as they should, since coping with difficulty is the main impetus for development), the teacher has several options. If he or she leaves the students to struggle by themselves, they may eventually overcome the problem; or

they may become discouraged and give up. If they are allowed to collaborate, they may solve the problem and learn from each other. If the source of the problem is not related to the pedagogical goal, the teacher may repeat, paraphrase or explain the problem word or phrase. If the problem is closely related to the focus of the task, however, too much help from the teacher could defeat the object. In such cases, an easier preparatory task should be assigned first.

The teacher would also need to decide which tasks could be done effectively at home (the more, the better) and which should be done in the language laboratory by individual students or in the classroom by the whole class, using a single tape recorder. For a more detailed analysis of the teacher's role, please see Underwood (1989: 30-69).

Placement tests should be given before the programme starts in order to ensure that students in any group would begin at the same level and proceed at roughly the same rate. Progress tests should be given periodically, along with diagnostic tests designed to show whether later parts of the syllabus are too easy or too difficult. The designing of listening tests is very complex, but should be done at the institutional level if possible in order to reflect the estimated proficiency level of incoming students; commercially available tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC tend to test effectively only at advanced proficiency levels. For a thorough discussion of assessment, please see Rost (1990: Chapter 7) ; Heaton (1991: Chapter 6) : Madsen (1983: Chapter 7) and Hughes (1989: Chapter 12).

Conclusion

There is a tendency in Japanese colleges and language schools for listening comprehension to be taught as one of many components in a conversation programme or ignored altogether, even though the recent inclusion of listening in some university entrance examinations attests to its importance. This tendency may be reinforced by the growing popularity of content-based language teaching in which language is taught holistically rather than as four integrated but essentially different macroskills. While holistic approaches to language teaching have definite advantages at higher proficiency levels, I believe that in listening, as in reading, writing and speaking, there are certain unique fundamental skills and strategies which must be developed systematically at an early stage in order for learners to benefit fully from all of the input they receive. Many freshmen enter Japanese universities with a very low level of EFL listening comprehension which hinders their progress in all classes taught by native

speakers of English and prevents them from benefiting from the vast resources avail-
able to them in the form of movies, videos, bilingual television, vocal music and so
on. Aural input performs a key role in language acquisition, but only if it is
comprehended.

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