

Listening Comprehension: The Neglected Skill.

JoAnn Miller, Instituto Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales.

Although all professionals involved in four-skills programs seem to agree that the development of efficient listening is important to all students who someday plan to communicate in a foreign language outside the classroom, very little effective material has been developed directed specifically at these students' needs. There is material designed for students with academic goals such as note-taking (Rost, 1981; Kisslinger & Rost, 1980) and listening material designed for use with specific methods, such as Total Physical Response (Griffiee, 1982), but there is very little material which is communicative, strategy-based and realistic, which is designed to lead the student into real listening situations outside the classroom. This article will briefly discuss students' listening needs and then will present some examples of how listening can be incorporated into the four skill classroom.

I. Listening Comprehension is one of the four basic skills. Along with reading it is the skill we use to understand the world around us. (See Figure 1). Both listening and reading input information in to the brain where it is processed or stored and if necessary a suitable response is developed which is presented to the world through the output skills: speaking or writing.

Most commonly, textbooks use reading as their only input skill and speaking or writing as output. Some teachers who use the target language to a great extent in class allow students some practice with listening, but this practice is not usually given in an organized or planned fashion.

Listening, however is for students in four skills courses or in real life experiences, as important or even more important skill than reading is. In reality the largest amount of information we receive daily is input through listening. Besides it must be remembered that the illiterate survive in the world without being able to read, but people with hearing difficulties are considered to be handicapped.

Listening in the ESL classroom is the forgotten skill. Textbooks generally ignore it or only test it, never teaching it first, and teachers tend to leave it to chance. If we think it is necessary to dedicate class time to the teaching of reading, we should also dedicate time to the organized teaching of the listening skill.

II. Listening, like reading, is an active skill, not a passive one. Listeners must be able to contribute to the communication act if they want to effectively understand the information being heard. The listener must contribute both linguistic knowledge as well as non-linguistic knowledge. Linguistically, the listener must understand at least the rudiments of the language being spoken in order to understand it and non-linguistically the listener must be able to recognize and interpret the situation on hand, be able to interpret emotions, background noises and gestures. Just having sufficient linguistic knowledge is not enough—the listener must have sufficient socio-cultural information available if the entire communicative situation is to be understood.

III. Just as is the case for reading, listening strategies should be taught in the classroom. In the teaching of reading, we assume the student already knows how to read in the native

language and that the only thing needed is assistance in learning to transfer these skills. In listening this is even more the case. We know our students can hear and we assume in their daily activities they are able to function normally - receiving aural input and reacting in a logical fashion. Our job as teachers is to help the students learn to transfer these listening skills to the new language situation.

One of the major difficulties facing beginning students in their first few days of language instruction is their lack of confidence in their own ability to understand the new language. Immersion-like classes, in which the student hears only the foreign language from the very beginning, are quite popular and apparently successful, but how many students give up during the first few days of class because their nervousness when presented with the new language causes them to "block" and prevents them from understanding even simple cognate expressions.

This is not to suggest that the use of the foreign language in the classroom is useless or counterproductive. It is only a suggestion that what students need in their first hours of language learning is a chance to gain confidence in their own listening abilities. Once they have confidence in themselves, they will be open to transfer listening abilities and strategies from their native language into the target language.

One of our obligations as teachers is to instill in our students a certain self-confidence in their own abilities. One way to do this is by beginning the class with simple non-linguistic practices designed in a way that even the most nervous student can find success. The practices could deal with the simple identification of sound (the engine of a car,

a cow mooing, etc.), the interpretation of dramatic scenes from movies, presented to the students with the sound turned off to be interpreted on the basis of the actors gestures and emotions alone. Such practices in which students must rely on their non-linguistic abilities can do wonders to improve their self-confidence at the same time as it helps them to understand differences in socio-cultural situations and habits.

IV. Once students have sufficient confidence in their own abilities, a series of strategy-based practices can help them learn to transfer the listening strategies they use in their native language to the foreign language.

Listening strategies are an unconscious part of our lives in our native language. In our native language we PREDICT what we imagine we will hear in a conversation based on non-linguistic cues, such as where the conversation is taking place, who we are talking to, what emotions we note in the persons actions and gestures, etc. and, since we always have a specific PURPOSE in mind when we take part in a communication, we adapt our listening style based on what is expected of us: we listen to an old aunt's complaints about her rheumatism differently than we do to a lecture which we know will later be included in an exam.

In our native language we do not listen to every word, but rather we focus our attention on KEYWORDS and we FILTER extraneous noises and unknown or unimportant information. This is one of and ESL student's biggest problems: New language learners usually worry so much about understanding everything, that they stop listening if a new vocabulary item is presented or if they didn't understand a particular word. In reading, it is possible to stop and contemplate an unknown word, in listening, our co-

communicator does not stop speaking and we miss a large part of the communication. An effective listener, on the other hand, is aware that it is not essential to understand everything in a communication. Many unknown words can be filtered out without affecting communication as long as certain key words are understood.

In our native language we also have the ability to ORGANIZE what we hear in our minds and to RETAIN important information for later reference. New language learners tend either to try to remember everything, no matter how trivial, or they seem to forget everything, no matter how unimportant. Selective retention of material is a skill that often has to be redeveloped in the target language.

Many lists of listening strategies have been developed. Fig. 2 shows a shortened list. For a more detailed list see Richards (1985).

V. What then would be an ideal listening practice for a beginning student? Ideally, it should be strategy based and developed in a way that the student would be an active listener. Figure 3 offers some ideas for strategy-based beginning practices.

On a higher level, listening ability already exists-- students seem to understand the teacher and each other, but here listening skills must be refined and developed in a way that will prepare the student for listening in the real world outside the classroom. Here practices should be communicative and realistic.

On the beginning level the student was an active listener. It was necessary for him to participate in the communicative

process in order to understand the practice. On a higher level a student should be involved actively both as a listener and as a producer of language. The student who can use the language must become involved completely in the communicative process- he is ready for social listening. In social listening the student has to use all the listening strategies: he must be able to predict what his partner is going to say; he has to listen to key words and filter what is unimportant or unintelligible; he must retain information and organize it to use farther along in the conversation all of this while, at the same time, he is preparing what he wants to say and adjusting his thoughts as new (often unexpected) material becomes available.

One very common type of social-listening activity is the role play. Here each student takes a specific part in the conversation and must respond depending on what information is supplied by his partner. Role-plays are especially useful when combined with problem solving activities.

More advanced listeners also must be prepared for real life situations. Practices must be not only communicative, but also realistic. Some realistic listening situations could be: radio broadcasts, announcements at airport and train stations, telephone conversations (especially where only one side is heard).

Not only does the listening material have to be realistic, the exercise that goes with it also has to be related to real-life situations. A common listening comprehension activity involves listening to a conversation and answering multiple-choice or alternative answer questions about the content of the conversation. This is an activity we never do in real-life. It would be more realistic to have the students retell what they heard in the

conversation, as if they were repeating gossip. Both listening material and exercises that are used must relate to realistic listening situation the student will later confront outside the classroom.

VI. In conclusion, ideally a listening comprehension practice should teach the listening skill through, strategy-based, realistic, communicative practices in which the student participates actively in a way that builds his confidence in his own abilities. If textbooks do not offer a teacher these types of materials, it is up to the teacher to revise exercises in order to make them fit the needs of the students.

Figure 1. The Four Basic Skills

<u>INPUT</u>		<u>OUTPUT</u>
Reading	Brain	Speaking
Listening		Writing

Figure 2.

Listening Strategies

Pre-listening Strategies:	Determining the purpose	Prediction
Listening Strategies:	Listening for key words	Filtering
Post-listening Strategies:	Retention	Organization

Figure 3.

Beginning Practice

<u>Strategy</u>	<u>Practice</u>
Prediction	1) Present student with a cartoon picture without a punch-line. Have student supply the punch line. 2) Use movies on video. Have students tell what is happening.

Purpose

- 1) Have students work within realistic situations where through listening they can find out specific information: flight number over loudspeaker at airport: a new telephone number with a recorded telephone number.

Key words

Use cloze techniques with passages or songs. Omit only key words.

Filtering

- 1) Use practices for specific information (see purpose), but include realistic background noises: music, bad connections, traffic, etc.
- 2) Use vocabulary that students do not know in practices. Be sure they realize that not every word is important.

Retention

- 1) Give students stories written in the wrong order. Read the story in the correct order and have students put their versions in that order.
- 2) Have students repeat longer and longer sentences.

Organization (not at a low-beginner level)

- 1) Retelling-Tell students jokes or stories and have them retell them to their classmates.
- 2) Gossip-Students listen to a conversation and then tell their classmates what they heard.

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