Teaching Listening to Lower Level Learners
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Listening successfully requires making use of both top-down and bottom-up processing skills. Unfortunately, Listening activities are often mere practice sessions where students are given the opportunity to listen to graded English but not actually taught. Bottom-up processing, that is the use of knowledge about the language system, is vital for decoding. Here phonology is often ignored. Breaking up 'listening' into its various sub-skills, for example, understanding gist, making inferences using background and situational knowledge, understanding elided consonants and so on, allows for the presentation and subsequent measurement of meaningful achievement gains. Presented is an approach that focuses on these skills, and gives students an opportunity to increase overall proficiency through a series of achievement gains based on an understanding of these sub-skills. The methodology for this approach is not all that far divorced from traditional communicative pedagogy, the difference is in the 'what' of the curriculum, not the 'how'.

INTRODUCTION

Most students and many teachers agree that a student’s level of listening comprehension is far lower than any other linguistic skill they possess. Whilst their comprehension of classroom discourse may in fact be high, thanks to their teacher’s and textbook’s reduction of certain phonological features, their ability to comprehend native or non-native speakers of English outside of school, in the ‘real world’, is, in many cases, quite poor to the point where the student doubts their linguistic achievements or believe that their homestay family speaks some bizarre dialect of English only comprehended by other native speakers. The problem lies in the fact that the majority of ESL/EFL students have never actually been taught how to listen to English. They have practised listening, they have been tested, but they have never been taught or given guidance about how to listen to English.

By breaking up listening into sub-skills and taking advantage of some of the more common phonological features of naturally spoken English (NSE), students can improve their comprehension of those bizarre dialects of English spoken at home and teachers can gradually and systematically reduce their use of their ‘teacher-voice’. By naturally spoken English I am not referring to one particular kind of English and not even Englishes spoken by native speakers only but instead English as it is used in day to day, formal and informal, non-classroom discourse.

THE DEFAULT METHOD OF TEACHING LISTENING

It appears that in ELT materials and methodology there is a default listening lesson/activity that rarely, if ever, actually teaches the students anything about how to listen to English more effectively. Take any four skills integrated textbook and you will find that listening activities are simply opportunities for students to practice listening to English (Field 1998). Usually these lessons begin with some sort of pre-teaching of the context of the listening and some of the vocabulary contained within the text but the actual listening task is often simply: pre-teach vocabulary and maybe context, listen to the text, listen again and finally answer some sort of comprehension questions. This is not by itself necessarily a bad activity but when it is the only way in which students are engaged in listening texts then little or no teaching, and more importantly learning, is taking place.

Field (1998) refers to the default method of teaching as focusing on product rather than process. ‘How’ a student arrives at an answer is nowhere near as important as what the answer is. This begs the question: If we don’t focus on how a student gets an
answer to a listening comprehension question then how do we as teachers assist students who don’t get the answer in the first place. The default method of teaching listening assumes that the students will have better luck next time.

Most listening materials in a text also contain terribly non-authentic texts. Although the debate over authentic and graded materials is beyond the scope of this paper I think that it is necessary to argue that fully authentic naturally spoken English would be incomprehensible to the average elementary level student that has learnt English for five years for, on average, two hours a week. This student needs to listen to material that is not fully authentic in terms of its ‘connectedness.’ However, it is not helping the student to listen to something, for the purposes of comprehension, to listen to something that is completely divorced from natural speech. The level of ‘connectedness’ or the amount of phonological features spoken needs to be carefully introduced and examined.

**HOW LISTENING COMPREHENSION IS ACHIEVED: INTERACTIVE PROCESSING**

Richards (1990) provides a clear description of how listening comprehension is achieved by native or non-native listeners. He refers to this listening process as bottom-up and top-down processing. Bottom-up processing refers to the decoding process, the direct decoding of language into meaningful units, from sound waves through the air, in through our ears and into our brain where meaning is decoded. To decode sounds students need to know the code. The code consists of how the sounds work and how they string together and how the code can change in different ways when it is strung together. Most students have never been taught how English changes when it's strung together in sentences. Alternatively, top-down processing refers to how we use our world knowledge to attribute meaning to language input; how our knowledge of social convention helps us understand meaning.

Clearly these two processes do not act independently. The relationship between the two is not fully understood but it is clear that there is some sort of compensatory relationship, that is, when one process does not work effectively the other assists to fill in any gaps (Stanovich 1980). This explains why we say “What did you say?” when a fraction of a second later we fill in what we did not fully decode and quickly follow it up with “Don’t worry.” The relationship must go even further than simply compensatory, for that assumes that one type of processing is favoured when in fact they work together. In different contexts with different discourses one type of processing may work harder than the other. When someone is in a familiar context, listening to a familiar voice the bottom-up process may not be working as hard as the top-down process. As an native speaker of urban Australian English I know that listening to a Glaswegian discuss Scottish football challenges my bottom-up processing significantly.

Richards (1990) discusses the importance of the transactional and interactional functions of language but presents a very simplistic version of how these two functions relate to the two types of comprehension processes. While his representation may be simple it still raises an important point; teachers need to be aware that different functions or different discourse types are processed differently and that the level of bottom-up processing needed by a learner is determined by the amount of top-down processing that a student can bring to their listening. Basically students are able to engage top-down process more in a text dominated by interactional functions than they would in a text dominated by transactional functions.
Figure 1: Richards (1990:57) Four part classification of listening processes and listening purposes

Rather than Richards simple diagram (Figure 1) that compares the different demands of different listening activities a more complex relationship exists. Both axis of this diagram represent continuums rather than fixed blocks. On these continuums different discourse types need to be plotted. A better relationship model may look something like this:

Figure 2: The continuums of listening processes and functions

The asterisk in Figure 2 may denote the level of processing needed by a student at a lecture they did not do the pre-reading for and therefore know little about the topic. The student is required to bottom-up process the sounds made by the lecturer to make sense of the new information being transacted. This discourse is primarily transactional as the lecturer rarely invites discussion. Meanwhile the ‘@’ symbol represents the conversation had by many on a Friday evening in the pub or at a café telling friends of the week’s events and plans for the weekend. Top-down processing is vital as previous conversations and the context of people’s lives comes into play and bottom-up processing is necessary to decode any new information. This conversation is primarily interactional but contains elements of a transaction.

The implications for language teaching are enormous but are still being ignored by most textbook and curriculum designers. Bottom-up processing for listening is still not part of most textbooks and the default method of teaching listening still dominates ESL/EFL. Teachers need to be aware that the amount of top-down processing varies according to the text. There is little or no point doing some sort of predict and check activity when the discourse type is not amenable. For example, if you are going to listen

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to a conversation between a clerk in a department store and a customer then top-down processing will be highly activated, therefore predict and check activities are useful. However, if you are going to listen to someone talk about their holiday in Thailand, a place your students have never been and know little about, then bottom-up processing is utilised more. In this situation predict and check is of little use.

RAISING STUDENT’S AWARENESS OF DECODING

Schmidt (1995) and Goh (1997) both stress the importance of metacognitive awareness and what has been attributed to Schmidt as ‘the noticing hypothesis’. Whilst not exactly the same, what both of these researchers argue is that by being aware of, or noticing, certain features of L2, second language learners are assisted in their acquisition of said L2. These theories are controversial. Researchers argue back and forth over the importance of metacognitive awareness and noticing (Combs 2004). Research in this area is still continuing but there appears to be some merit to the idea that raising students’ awareness of certain language features does in fact assist the acquisition of a second language. As language teachers with students demanding immediate improvements, surely our role is not only to provide comprehensible input but also to highlight certain features, be they grammatical, lexical or phonological.

How does this apply to listening? At present almost no texts are addressing the student’s need to become more aware of the phonological complexities of naturally spoken English as it pertains to improving their listening comprehension. Listening materials and listening tasks need to consider the fact that many students are unable to decode NSE and that only through massive amounts of input or by raising student awareness of NSE’s features will this be rectified. Richards (1983) and Lund (1990) began a taxonomy of listening skills. Included in their taxonomies were the skills needed to recognise the phonological features of NSE. Why don’t textbooks reflect this? Is it that it is simply too hard for designers to get this point across? Is it easier to continue using the default method despite its shortcomings? No. Teachers can help students become aware of some of the more common features of NSE. Listening sub-skills can be developed and measured, it just takes a bit more work.

WHICH PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES?

There are certain features of naturally spoken English that are common to any accent. An example of these might include:

- Liaison;
- The Central Vowel;
- Assimilation;
- Elision;
- Intrusion;
- Ellipsis and;
- Prominence

Depending on your students’ needs different features may be important. There is a difficulty here. To select which features are important for students to notice we need to look at the frequency of the features in the environments the students wish to comprehend. If you are teaching exam preparation classes you need to know which features are common and which are not. If you are readying students for tertiary study it would be useful to know which features are common in university lectures and tutorials. Of course every speaker is different and register plays a fundamental role in deciding how much a speaker ‘reduces’ their speech, but if we are to assist students decode listenings which are incomprehensible to them, then the frequency of these and other features is paramount.

To my knowledge no study has been done that examines the frequency of phonological features in ELT materials and, from personal experience I cannot imagine that there is any sort of systematic way of grading these features in textbook listenings. Some texts
do highlight these features for production but very few for comprehension. I know of many teachers and some texts that highlight these features for production, rhythm, accent reduction and stress to name a few. However, I know of almost no examples of these features being used to assist student with their listening difficulties. Listening texts are graded in terms of vocabulary and grammar, in much the same way that readings are graded, but the added complexity of phonology does not appear to be graded in a systematic way.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

What is to be done in the classroom? First of all teachers need to examine their current listening texts for their level of phonological complexity. Select one phonological feature per text, or short part of a text, to highlight to students. Explain to students how that feature works. I personally do not use the meta-language of phonology as I often forget the terms myself. Have students listen for the same feature in other parts of the text. Use tapescripts to predict where that feature may occur and listen to check if it did in fact occur. Stress to students that these features are not rules but are used by speakers how and when they want. These features are not yes or no they often lie on a continuum and the amount of assimilation or ellipsis, for example, is difficult to distinguish. Remember that the purpose of this is to raise the student's awareness of these features not drill them about it. Other strategies involve students attempting to count the number of words spoken in a short text or the old favourite of actually dictating the words spoken. For more classroom ideas see Richards (1990).

This method does not take away the default method it simply complements it. Give students practice in listenings which ask students to interpret and understand meaning, together with listenings which teach learners about how English is actually spoken.

CONCLUSION

Despite the 25 or more year call to introduce bottom-up processing activities for listening comprehension to the ESL/EFL classroom, most textbook and curriculum designers have continued to rely on a default method of teaching listening- simply practice. Listening comprehension involves two main processes- bottom-up and top-down. Top-down processes have to some degree been incorporated into current listening texts and activities through pre-listening tasks involving context. However, bottom-up processes continue to be ignored. Certain phonological features common to naturally spoken English may be examined by teachers to assist students bottom-up process the language. Further research is necessary to examine the number of phonological features that occur in certain discourse types and how to grade these features appropriately in texts for ESL/EFL learners.

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REFERENCES


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