

Rethinking the teaching of listening: from a focus on product to a focus on processes

(From the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation project, Foreign language listening comprehension: from current practice to improved pedagogy).

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Background

- Listening as a 'complex, active process of interpretation' (Vandergrift, n.d.)
- Unidirectional listening
- Perceptions of difficulty and lack of progress (Graham, 2006)
- Poorly developed listening strategies (Graham, Santos and Vanderplank, 2008 and 2011)
- Yet research does give many pointers regarding what leads to effective listening

Teachers

- How is it taught? How do teachers conceptualise listening? Little evidence (Graham et al 2011)
- Little or no research into teacher cognition regarding listening – more research needed on what teachers believe across all aspects of L2 (Tsui, 2011)
- Comprehension approach (Field 2008): practice, ‘delivery’, emphasis on ‘obtaining information’, and not ‘the use we make of the answers’ (p. 80):

‘Without establishing why the errors occurred, we have no means of assisting learners to get it right next time.’ (Field, 2008:81)

Textbooks

- Gulf between listening research and theory, and listening activities (Mendelsohn, 1998)
- Out of step with new theories and approaches (Hill & Tomlinson, 2003)
- A 'product' approach to listening (Santos, 2009)
- Teacher reliance as a coping strategy? (Kaufmann, 2005; Kramer-Dahl, 2008)
- Influence of 'standards'/curriculum prescription on textbooks and teaching (Mitchell, 2001)
- Little firm evidence

Pause for reflection:
How do you relate to the points made so far?

- Think of a listening activity you have done recently.
- Write down the steps you have followed on that occasion.

How familiar does this sound?

‘Picture this scene during a listening lesson. A teacher introduces the topic of a listening text and invites students to say what they know about it. She writes their ideas and unfamiliar words on the board. Next, she tells the students to read the instructions for the listening activity carefully to find out what information in the listening text to pay attention to. After this, the teacher plays the recording and the students listen attentively. ...’ →

(Cont'd)

‘...They complete the activity by giving appropriate written responses (for example, choosing the correct options, filling in the blanks, sequencing information, drawing a diagram, jotting down notes). The teacher plays the recording again and instructs the students to confirm or change their responses. After that, she tells the class what the correct responses are, and the students find out ‘where they have gone wrong. ...’ →

Cont'd

‘...Does this sound familiar to you? Well, that was what I used to do when delivering listening lessons. My emphasis was on the product or outcome of my students’ listening. What mattered most was how accurate or complete their responses were. In retrospect, even though I did many listening exercises, I was not *teaching* my students how to listen effectively. I was merely *testing* their comprehension without showing them how they could improve their listening.’

(Goh, 2010:179-180)

How do listening strategies fit into this?

- Strategies:
 - Conscious mental activities
 - Goal-orientated
 - Transferrable to other situations and tasks
(Macaro, 2006)
- The concept allows us to refocus:
 - from product to process
 - from 'doing' listening to 'teaching' listening

What strategies do effective listeners use?

**Preparing to
check out the
evidence and
verify predictions**

**Getting in the right frame of mind –
concentration, calmness**

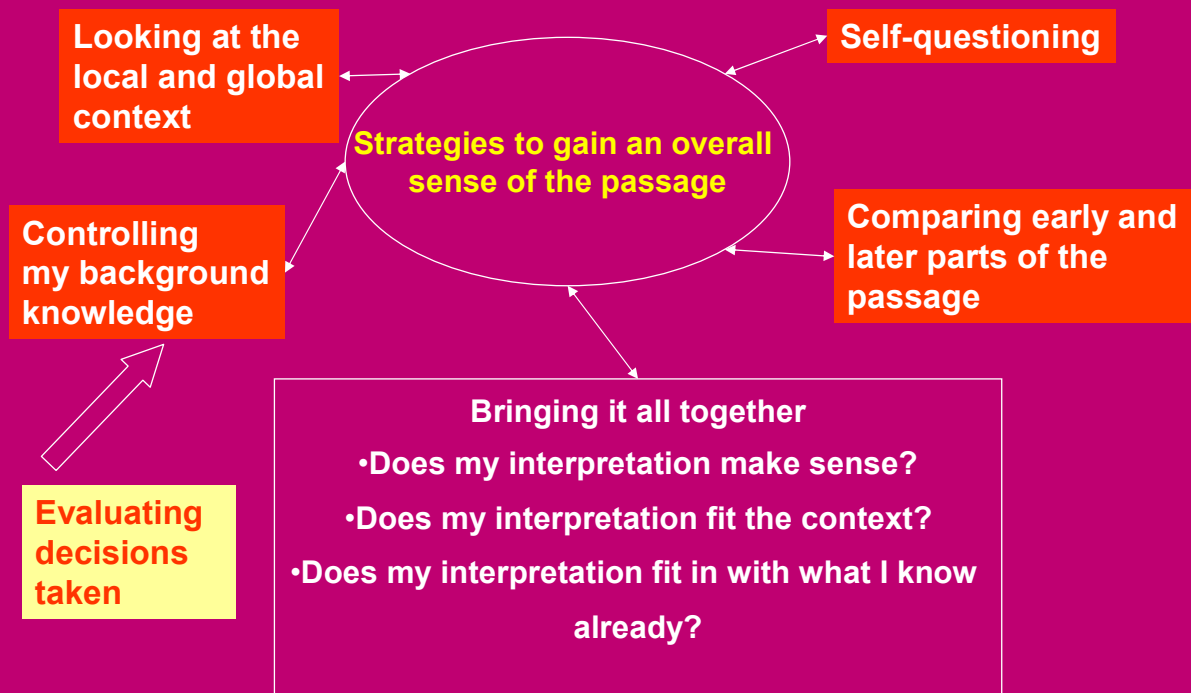
Preparation strategies

**Making predictions
Thinking of words and
phrases that might be
heard, plus synonyms**

**Making predictions
Thinking about the likely
topic and themes of the
passage**



Strategies used by effective listeners



Expectations? But not assessed

Secondary Curriculum for 11-14 year olds:

•2.1 Developing language-learning strategies

- Pupils should be able to:
- ...use previous knowledge, context and other clues to work out the meaning of what they hear or read

•2.2 Developing language skills

- Pupils should be able to:
- listen for gist or detail
- deal with unfamiliar language, unexpected responses and unpredictable situations.

QCA (2007). National Curriculum for MFL, Programme of Study.

Research questions

1. What is the extent and nature of the understanding held by MFL teachers in England of foreign language listening comprehension as a skill? **Questionnaires, interviews, observations**
2. How do they make use of the listening materials presented in textbooks? **Questionnaires, interviews, observations**
3. How is listening approached in widely-used textbooks in French, German and Spanish for beginning learners? **Textbook analysis**
4. To what extent can the data gathered from these sources develop teachers' beliefs about and practice in listening? **Materials development, workshops, module reflections, post-module observation and interview**

Questionnaires

- Random sample of 90 secondary schools in England, across a range of contexts + 32 local schools
- Replies received from 46 schools throughout England; a total of 115 teachers in a range of state maintained schools (90% in comprehensives)
- Majority of teachers (approx 85%) non-native speakers of language taught
- Experience: 0-3yrs (20%); 4-8rs (22%); 9-15yrs (32%); 16+ yrs (26%)

Findings 1: The purpose of listening

What, in your view, is the main purpose of carrying out listening tasks at KS3? Please rank the following in order of importance, with 1 for the most important reason, 5 the least important.

- To extend learners' vocabulary _____
- To increase learners' opportunities to practise listening _____
- To teach learners how to listen more effectively _____
- To assess how well learners can listen _____
- To provide learners with a model of pronunciation _____
- If you have another reason, please write it here _____

Results: the purpose of listening

Purpose	Mean
To teach learners how to listen more effectively	2.1
To increase learners' opportunities to practise listening	2.3
To provide learners with a model of pronunciation	3.1
To assess how well learners can listen	3.5
To extend learners' vocabulary	3.8

Findings 2: Pre- and post-listening

	Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
Before listening, I remind learners of vocabulary linked to the topic			77%	
Before listening, I give pupils vocabulary items that will be used in the passage			38%	
Before listening, I ask learners to predict vocabulary they might hear (e.g. verbs, nouns)			47%	
Before listening, I ask learner to think of ideas/facts etc that might be discussed in the passage			39%	
Before listening, I ask pupils to discuss possible answers to the questions			20%	

	Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
After listening, I tell learners what the answers are (e.g. <i>Picture A</i> , <i>Picture B</i> , etc)				
After listening, I ask learners what answers they put (e.g. <i>Picture A</i> , <i>Picture B</i> , etc)			87%	
After listening, I ask learners to answer using target language words/phrases (e.g. ' <i>He went to the cinema</i> ' (in TL))				
After listening, I ask learners how they felt about the task			49%	
After listening, I ask learners what they did to complete the task			19%	
After listening, I advise learners how to deal with difficulties next time			47%	
After listening, I ask learners to use language/structures used in the passage in a productive follow-up task				

Findings 3: Beliefs

Agree or
Agree
Strongly:

It is possible to teach learners how to listen more effectively	92%
When learners don't understand a word they should work out its meaning from the context	79%
When learners don't understand a word they should work out its meaning from the word/phrases that precedes or follow the unknown word	72%
When learners don't understand a word they should work out its meaning from their linguistic knowledge	60%
Learners' main problems lie in the difficulty they have in identifying where word/phrase/sentence boundaries are	58%
After listening, students should discuss how they completed the listening activity	44%
After listening, students should discuss how they felt about the listening activity	48%

Procedures and justifications

- Common first procedure: **explaining or going through as a class the task requirements; breaking task down; pre-teaching vocabulary: emphasis on 'task completion' rather than on 'teaching listening'**
- **Very little post-listening work**
- Justifications: to help learners find the answer to the task, to get learners to do what is expected of them (in terms of completing the task, and sometimes in terms of behaviour), to help them find the answers for the task, and to reassure them: controlled listening with nothing unpredictable: 'So that pupils know exactly what is coming and that it is related to the sentences/structures we have (just) studied'

Observations

- 24 lessons observed
- 13 teachers
- 9 schools
- 55 'listening events': self-contained instances around listening passages (recorded or spoken by class or teacher)



Observed items	Events	Classes	Teachers
Unknown vocab mentioned by teacher before listening	41.8%	66.7%	85.7%
Gist of listening exercise set up by teacher pre-listening	89.1%	100%	100.0%
Learning objectives explained to class	23.6%	33.3%	50.0%
Unknown vocab raised by students after listening	10.9%	20.8%	28.6%
Predictions before listening	27.3%	50.0%	57.1%
Predictions after listening	5.5%	12.5%	14.3%
Teacher asks pupils' opinion on difficulty of task	32.7%	54.2%	64.3%
Teacher gives instructions on how to tackle such tasks next time	20.0%	37.5%	57.1%
Teacher models listening exercise in pre-listening example	29.1%	50.0%	50.0%
Pupils discuss listening activity beyond giving answers to set questions	21.8%	37.5%	42.9%



For example: Teacher gives instructions on how to tackle such tasks next time

Teacher: I'm gonna play again, this time check your answers.

(T asks ss to raise their hands as well.)

Teacher: What is it that you're listening out for?.... What are the key words?

Pupils: *Tu* and *vous*

Teacher: What if you didn't get it?

(A pupil says that *Monsieur* might indicate politeness]

Teacher: *Monsieur* might be polite.... What's the difference between *vous tournez* et *tu tournes*?

(Pupils mention the difference in pronunciation)

Teacher: So if you don't get it, there are other clues....

(3 mins)

For example: Students discuss listening activity beyond giving answers to set questions

Pupil: He said *estudio*.

Teacher: Did he?

(Other pupils say they heard the same)

Teacher: Guys you could be right. You know how people make textbooks, they can be in a hurry.

Teacher (while reading the script): Ah I know exactly what you've done.

(T writes *Eso es todo* on board and explains the cause of the problem, highlighting the fact that ss '*hadn't seen this yet*'

Teacher: Don't worry about this. Don't take a mark off. Scores? ... Good... Level 3...This is new vocabulary, you're coping really well

Interviews

- **Listening as passive/silent. control mechanism Vs listening as interaction and engagement, negotiation**

Listening is ready made – it's just listening to it and prepping it...

Listening is a passive exercise... there 's not a lot of effort required. It's quite relaxing. It calmed that lot down brilliantly... VS.

Listening effectively means wanting to listen and therefore interacting and engaging with what you are hearing. Or giving them an opportunity to respond.

- **Focus on all vocab being known beforehand and avoiding risk/dealing with difficulty/fear of students losing confidence**

Of course the basis is that they know the vocabulary.....

A listening, it has to be set up. You have to make sure they have the vocabulary they need before hand.....

I don't like to have anything that is too testing for them'

[Pre-teaching vocab] it's a learning tool. It's all part of their confidence.

Listening and getting it right.

Interviews

- **Strategies as procedures, class control:**

*I think the critical thing is that they know what the task requires, making sure the environment is right (...) So they understand the parameters and the rules if you like. But I think also explicit instructions. It's always got to be that they understand the task, you know, **we're talking strategies so I guess it's having the right environment, making sure it's quiet. And making sure they know what they're listening out for.***

- **Preparing learners for listening 'tasks', exams, but not for 'life':**

So in a way what we do with our listening is preparing them for exams.... But that's exam technique I don't know how much that adds to be able to survive in real life. But as an exam technique that's invaluable.

- **Awareness of shortcomings of textbooks but lack of time/expertise prevents most from moving beyond**

Textbooks

- A small number of books used by all teachers in sample (Expo, Metro, Logo, Echo, Listos, Mira)
- Two series examined in each language, across Key Stage 3 (15 in total)
- Looked at text type, length, speech rate, task demands, listening strategy support

Textbook findings

- Focus on locating very specific, factual information, matching or repetition
- Very little focus on dealing with unknown words
- Texts relatively short, little redundancy
- Very little focus on listening strategies – more so in more recent books
- Listening as finding information, presentation and drilling. Little sense of dealing with the unpredictable

Listening strategies in teachers' guides

- In books with an average of over 100 listening activities, very few references to listening strategies and how teachers might present these (min 0, max 16)
- Strategies briefly included: prediction (but rarely verification); using tone of voice/intonation; selective attention/focusing on specific information – but lack of specific advice on how to implement: 'Encourage pupils to listen for clues in Maribel's tone of voice'
- Greater focus on procedures, lack of clear advice: '*They may need to hear this a few times and have extra time to write*'; '*Warn them that there is a lot of extraneous detail*'.

Intervention

- Based around key findings – ‘effective’ listening; teaching listening as a specific skill; prediction and verification; inferencing/key word focus; sounds/segmentation; feedback.
- Workshops
- Online modules

An example: The listening passage

Adrien Storr (14 ans) a de la chance: sa mère a gagné notre concours du mois de juin. Son prix? Quinze jours au Sénégal pour deux personnes ... (continues) (from Expo 2, Module 5, Unit 4, Exercise 1)

How do the following activities differ?

For each activity, identify:

- The aims/objectives
- What knowledge and/or skills each presupposes and/or develops
- What knowledge/skills seem to be neglected.

Activity 1

- a) The class has been studying the general topic of holidays. The teacher then plays the passage, without offering the transcription in the book. Students are asked to listen and try to understand as much as possible.
- b) The teacher asks the class what they did when they didn't understand certain words or phrases. Class discusses this question in groups.
- c) Groups feedback the things they did when they didn't understand; teacher writes these up as a list on the board.
- d) Teacher takes two of the ideas and, replaying the tape, thinks aloud to demonstrate how they could be used with the passage. For example, making use of repetition and paraphrase to make out a new word, as in this example: *et avec accès direct à la plage. Et quelle plage! ... Du sable fin s'étendant sur plus de 3 kilomètres...*



Activity 1 (Cont'd)

e) Teacher also models one or two strategies pupils didn't suggest, for example, listening to what comes before and after the problem word, as in this part: *Adrien Storr (14 ans) a de la chance: sa mère a gagné notre concours du mois de juin. Son prix? Quinze jours au Sénégal pour deux personnes ...*

Unknown word = concours. Clues from 'gagné' and 'Son prix?'

Also from the fact that Adrien is being offered something nice.

f) Teacher gives learners a checklist of strategies discussed (see Appendix in handout for an example of what such a checklist might look like). Using another passage containing some unknown words, teacher asks learners to try to use at least 2 of the new strategies.

g) Learners reflect at the end of the lesson which of the strategies seemed to be the most helpful and why, recording their reflections in a special log. Homework is to try out a wider range from the checklist on another passage posted on the VLE, to tick which ones they used, and to report back next lesson which were the most helpful.

Activity 1 (Cont'd)

- h) In subsequent lessons, teacher reminds learners to use their checklist, gradually reminding them less often.
- i) In subsequent homeworks, teacher asks learners to identify main area they want to improve in listening and to identify strategies to use to do this. →



Action Plan

Name:

I want to be able to

**I have selected the following
strategies**

I will know I have improved because

From Grenfell and Harris (1999, p.87)

Activity 2

- Listen to the audio and complete the grid about Adrien's holiday:

Where did he go?	
With whom?	
How did they go?	
Where did they stay?	
What did he do there? (write down as many activities as you can get)	

- Add up your score (1 point for each of the 4 rows; 1 point for each correct activity in row 5): how many points did you get?

Activity 3

Original <u>textbook activity</u>	Apparent <u>rationale</u>?
Pupils listen to the recording and follow the text in the book. Beforehand, you may want to ask pupils to read the text aloud in pairs, identifying <u>words which</u> they find difficult to pronounce.	Focus on production (pronunciation) rather than on comprehension?
Encourage your pupils to listen out for these words when they then listen to the recording.	
Having identified cognates and words they know in the text during the starter activity, pupils look up unknown words in the glossary at the back of the book.	
You might want to set a limit of three or four key words to be looked up, so that pupils <u>practise identifying</u> unknown words whose meaning is essential to their understanding of the text.	

From Expo 2, Module 4, Unit 5, Exercise 1

Conclusion

- Mastery experiences (Bandura, 1995): a curriculum 'which provides learners with a range of [reading] problems to be overcome via strategy use at a much earlier time, and which has higher expectations of what they can achieve in the first 2 years of their foreign language study' (Macaro and Erler, 2008: 116)
- Our research suggests that we don't yet have this approach for listening
- Importance of listening as part of input and therefore central to language learning
- Need to rethink how curriculum time, textbooks and classroom practices allow us to move from product to process

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