

‘Did you say what I thought you did?’ Teaching listening

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Teaching Listening

To what extent do we actually teach listening?

Aspects to consider

What can we and students do before students listen to something?

What should students be doing whilst they are listening?

What can we and students do after they have finished listening?

How can we support the development of listening skills in general?

How do you know
what students have
understood?

What sort of feedback is
appropriate:

- during lessons?
- for homework?



Making sense of what you hear

The Infinite Monkey Cage, Radio 4



What can you hear?

The McGurk effect: <http://derrenbrown.co.uk/mcgurk-effect/>

Listening practice



The examples here are for one language you probably don't speak and one you might.



What do you understand? What would help you understand more? How could you support your students?

Spoken
language:

Is rapid and transitory!

May be mumbled.

May not sound like the
language learned in
the classroom.

May include unknown
vocabulary.

May contain unknown
grammar.



The difficulty with listening

‘Pupils were questioned ... about the relative difficulty of the four language-learning skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – and in all three languages their opinions were very much the same. Listening was found to be the most difficult skill by the majority of pupils, irrespective of the language they were learning.’

David Philips and Caroline Filmer-Sankey, 1993, *Diversification in modern language teaching, Choice and the national curriculum*, Routledge, London and New York

The sort of things our students say:

Some of the listening exercises are pretty impossible. I spend ages checking vocab and grammar. We're told we only need to understand the gist, but that isn't enough for me to answer the questions in the activity.

I agree dealing with vocab and audio activities is really hard.

Yes, I thought I was fairly good at understanding spoken language, but this is difficult stuff. And the different accents don't help.

I think this intermediate course is different from beginners, because the listening clips aren't simply recorded for us, but are authentic. I know it makes it harder, but I'd rather learn to cope with authentic sources than studio recordings.

Listening versus Reading

There are no white spaces between words.

'listening is a bit different from reading... listeners can't skim. The language comes rushing at them. Listening must be done in real time' (Brown, 2006)

Listeners may already 'know' all the words in an extract and fully understand a transcript, but if they cannot recognise those words in speech, they will not understand the spoken extract.

In reading, all words are instantly recognisable as words; in listening, on the other hand, word boundaries are not clear because of word stress differences and assimilation of sounds. Listeners need to become familiar with how this works in each language to be able to identify what are words in order to be able to understand them.

'cognates ... may be less useful when listening. Listening also involves understanding all sorts of reductions of sounds and blending of words.' (Brown, 2006)

Why do we listen?

To answer questions in an exam or exercise

For meaning

To improve speaking skills and pronunciation

To acquire new language – vocabulary and structures

To improve listening skills

Teaching of strategies

Listening comprehension involves both **top-down** and **bottom-up** strategies

'Top-down means using our prior knowledge and experiences; we know certain things about certain topics and situations and use that information to understand. Bottom-up ... means using the information we have about sounds, word meanings, and discourse markers like *first*, *then* and *after that* to assemble our understanding ... one step at a time.' (Brown, 2006)

Top-down strategies help listeners to recognise words (because they are expecting to hear them), but, on their own, top-down strategies cannot enable a listener to hear enough. Bottom-up strategies help listeners to apply what they know about how spoken language works and sounds so that they recognise unpredicted words and identify other words and deduce their meaning from context or how they must be spelled.

What do language teachers do?

Listening
exercises

Use past
papers

Use the
transcript

Use audios
related to the
textbooks

Focus on
pronunciation
and speaking

Reflection on our own practice



In OU materials there is some focus on strategies in Study Guides or Academic Skills sections on websites. There is also reference to Success with Languages.

There is sometimes an over-reliance on similarities between reading and listening strategies and a lack of recognition of the extra strategies needed for listening.

Where we teach strategies, these tend to be top-down, although there is some bottom-up strategy teaching, particularly in French, looking at stress patterns, liaison, differences between similar sounds.

In some languages, focus on the sound of the language is restricted mainly to Beginners level.

Mention of bottom-up strategies generally consists of advice to attune the ear by listening with the transcript or listening to the radio.

It is not generally explained to students why they are doing certain listening or pre-listening exercises.

Top-down Strategies

The purpose of top-down strategies is to enable students to **prepare for and recognise what they hear**.

As teachers, we may focus on using these strategies to help students to make an educated guess to enable them to get the correct answer.

This is fine in an exam, but as a general strategy it may not help students to become more attuned to the language they are learning.

Prior knowledge - aids comprehension

Organised in schemata – like scripts

Imagine going to a restaurant.

You will probably be asked if you would like a drink, a starter, what you would like for your main course, if you want any side orders.

You may be asked if your meal is good, if you'd like another drink.

When you ask for the bill you may be asked how you'd like to pay.

The script varies slightly from one country/language to another, but you can make assumptions about the questions being asked based on your prior knowledge.

Using prior knowledge is an example of a top-down strategy.

Prediction

Predict what might be heard (e.g. by thinking of what phrase/vocab might be used). Includes activating prior knowledge.

Exercises used in materials include listening out for phrases actually given; true/false; questions about specific detail.

Encourage students to think about the language AROUND the answer, e.g. if they are asked 'Where is Harry going on holiday?', they should listen out for **phrases that might introduce the answer** or **the question that might be asked**. They will then improve their ability to relate the sound of larger chunks to how the language is written and to better hear things when not focused on a question given in advance.

Verification of predictions

Listening involves continuous hypothesis-forming and testing **while listening**.

Students need to learn to check predictions and ideas of what they have heard against the context. The context includes all the surrounding language.

Gradual picture-building and verification:

Approach a recording in stages: listen and note words heard, replay, pausing if necessary, noting more and more each time.

Use knowledge of the typical structure of a specific type of extract to frame understanding.

Check understanding against the context and likely content.

Bottom-up strategies

Suggestions

Encourage students to analyse the written: spoken correlation.

Teach students about mutations, liaisons or swallowing of sounds in normal speech.

Teach students about stress patterns. Students often try to break up a stream of sound into words at the wrong point because they apply an English stress pattern.

... by encouraging students to:

do cloze exercises with listening extracts;

listen to short extracts, write what they think they hear and to compare to the transcript to identify common confusions;

become familiar with features of spoken language (e.g. interjections, hesitations or common discourse markers) so that they recognise them.

Recognising words – segmentation (when they start and finish) and variation (‘sloppy’) articulation

A nice shape

What's this?

Who asked him?

Your handbag

Succeed in imagining

ni(s) shape

wat-s(th)is

as(k)-t(h)im

ham-bag

succeed in (i)magining

(Rost 2002:24)

English examples

- Ann Dum, itsuh, it sarder tha nit looks.
- And, um, it's, uh, it's harder than it looks.
- Jew thing kill bee'a' the gamethen?
- Do you think he'll be at the game, then?
- Dijewsee the stay' shewu zin?

Deduce ?

Juicy ?

- Did you see the state she was in?

Links to useful resources

http://www.parapal-online.co.uk/resources/cloze_download.html#examples

Downloadable cloze maker

<http://www.camsoftpartners.co.uk/fwt.htm>

Fun with texts – also offers various cloze activities

Teaching listening strategies

Steven Brown (2006) suggests a systematic approach to teaching why students are listening:

- 1 Listening for gist – or main ideas
- 2 Listening for details
- 3 Listening for inference

Listening is **more** than listening comprehension exercises and is **more** than listening for meaning:

- Listening to improve pronunciation
- Listening to learn the relationship between written and spoken language
- Listening to improve speaking
- Listening to acquire structures and vocabulary
- Listening to improve listening skills in some way

Things to consider

Instead of just ‘doing’ listening, encourage students to think about how they listen.

Use listening activities for a variety of purposes – to improve pronunciation and to improve speaking, for example.

Every now and then, try to listen to snippets from a language you don’t really understand, it can help us remember what it’s like for language learners.

Ensure students know why they are doing a specific listening exercise and think about:

- what you and they could do to prepare;
- what strategies they should employ while listening;
- what feedback/follow-up work should be done afterwards.

Focus on listening for learning cultural information

French example:

http://students.open.ac.uk/fels/l120/content/block_2/unit_1/section_1/part_1.htm#n

What has been done well?

What else could have been done to support learners?

Focus on listening for learning cultural information

Spanish example:

http://students.open.ac.uk/fels/l140/content/block_1/unit_3/section_8/part_1.htm

What has been done well?

What else could have been done to support learners?

Focus on listening for teaching new language

German example:

http://students.open.ac.uk/fels/l130/content/block_1/unit_3/section_4/part_6.htm

What has been done well?

What else could have been done to support learners?

Take the time to teach liaisons

http://students.open.ac.uk/fels/I120/content/block_1/unit_1/section_6/part_1.htm

Here students have the chance to listen and read, helping them to learn where one word finishes and the next starts.

Using transcripts to improve your learning

Once you have worked through the activities based on video sequences, you may find it beneficial to watch the video sequences again together with their transcripts and to note down and repeat orally some structures featured in the sequence. For instance, you could select expressions such as 'il y a pas mal de mouches' and 'il y a trop de monde'. This should help you to retain more effectively the language you learn.

Doing activities on listening skills

http://students.open.ac.uk/fels/l130/content/block_3/unit_1/section_4/part_1.htm

Using visuals

Visual clues often help you understand the context. The images you see may refer to what you will hear, so you this prepares you for what you will be listening to.

Associating images with words and phrases is also an excellent way of memorising vocabulary and structures.

Giving clear instructions

This time you watch a video clip without knowing before you start any further details about what you are going to hear. Take in as much as you can, because in the next part of the activity you will be trying to answer questions without listening again.

Comments and ideas?

Thank you for listening.

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