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## **LISTENING COMPREHENSION: THREE PROBLEMS AND THREE SUGGESTIONS**

**Abstract:** Listening comprehension methodology of the last two decades is characterised by three problems which obstruct successful learning: misguided faith in first language research into listening; misplaced hope in the ability of learners to perceive elements of the stream of speech; and misdirected charity in helping the learners by focusing too much on what they can manage, and not focusing sufficiently on what they have to master.

### **Misguided faith**

Just over ten years ago, Anderson and Lynch (1988, p. 21) noted that there was very little research into listening in a second language. Because of this gap in research, applied linguists, textbook writers, and teacher trainers have gone to research in first language listening to find principles which will guide listening methodology. As a result, listening comprehension exercises are greatly (and in my view inappropriately) influenced by what is known about successful first language listening.

First language research has established that successful listening is characterised by:

- listening for a purpose
  - making predictions based on contextual information
  - making guesses when things aren't clear
  - inferring what is meant where necessary
  - not listening ('straining') for every word
- (adapted from Brown, 1990, p. 148)

Teacher trainers and textbook writers have made appropriate use of some of these findings, and inappropriate use of others. In particular they have taken the last of these points (*'they don't listen for every word'*) and have made it an article of faith. This article of faith promotes 'top-down' activities and denigrates any activity which could be characterised as 'bottom-up'. Of

course, there are very good reasons why we should be careful about this particular issue: we don't want learners to strain so much to hear every word that they cannot understand anything. In my view though, it is a mistake to abandon, as we have, bottom-up activities which introduce learners to the essential characteristics of speech.

The acceptance of this article of faith has resulted in the standard explanation of the communicative language teacher: 'You won't be able to understand every word, and you don't need to'. Now I find this explanation worryingly insufficient. Here's why.

Let us start with two indisputable facts: first, native listeners don't attend to every word; and second, learners don't understand every word. We make the mistake of proposing the first fact (*native listeners don't do it*) as a solution to the problems posed by the second fact (*learners don't understand*). In doing so, we ignore the fact that native speaker listeners have great advantages over non-natives both in terms of perceptual ability (in particular) and in terms of the abilities to guess, and predict on the basis of contextual knowledge. We expect learners to simulate native listener behaviour without helping them acquire one of the major prerequisites for such behaviour – adequate perceptual abilities.

Any activity which encourages of bottom-up processing, which requires learners to attend to the substance of speech, has become taboo. For example, some authors discourage teachers from giving learners the opportunity of looking at the tapescripts for fear that it 'reinforces the myth that learners can't understand meaning without catching everything they hear' (Helgesen et al, 1997, p. xii).

Thus, because of the misplaced faith in first language research, we have listening comprehension exercises which require learners to simulate native listener behaviour (*don't try to understand every word*) but which do not sufficiently address the need to teach learners how to acquire progressively native-like abilities in perception – there are insufficient bottom-up activities. If true, this is a serious indictment of an approach (Communicative Language Teaching) which claims to be 'learner centred' and claims to place great emphasis on learners' needs

### **Misplaced hope**

Listening exercises are also characterised by misplaced hope which often appears in the shape of the following words of encouragement to the

learners: 'Just listen to the stresses, they'll be in the most important words, then you'll understand'.

There are three problems with this view: first, very often, 'important' words such as negatives are often unstressed, and so-called 'unimportant' grammatical words are stressed; second, research indicates that it is difficult to pick out stressed words in a language which is not your own (c.f. Roach 1982); third, the concept of stress is loosely defined and fails to distinguish between word-level stress, and stresses associated with higher order phenomena such as tone units.

### **Misdirected charity**

Although all listening comprehension recordings are described as 'natural' very few of them are truly so. Many (though not all) are scripted and artificially slow: very few are instances of 'naturally occurring speech', or 'authentic speech'. The reasons for this can be found in statements such as the following from Penny Ur:

Students may learn best from listening to speech which, while not entirely authentic, is an approximation to the real thing, and is planned to take into account the learners' level of ability and particular difficulties. (Ur, 1984, p. 23)

I myself find nothing wrong in what Penny Ur says here but I would argue that listening comprehension materials are often over-charitable in leaning towards 'the learners' level of ability' and not taking account of the level of ability required to understand spontaneous fast speech. The gap between the learners' level and the target level (fast spontaneous speech) is a gap that we as teachers and materials writers must help learners bridge.

But we cannot help them bridge this gap if we continue with our charitable focus on what learners can manage at their current level.

We have to help learners cope with speech which is above their current level, and to arrive at a description of 'above current level', we need a description of the topmost level – a description of the features of 'difficult' (fast spontaneous) speech. We need such a description for use in teaching so that we can have an equal focus on both where our learners are, and where they have to get to.

### **Suggestion 1: More work on perception**

It is necessary to do more perception work than we are doing at present. Not that which requires learners to distinguish between phonemes, but work which gets students to attend to, observe, and learn from extracts of authentic, fast spontaneous speech.

Perception work is best conducted after doing the usual communicative work on understanding (*warm up, pre-listening, while listening*). It is also best done by focusing on the same areas which the *while listening* activities focused on. As Helgesen suggests (1998, p. 25) if students get the correct answers to the listening comprehension questions ask them 'How do you know?'. Students, in answering this question will provide the teacher with evidence of the level of their perceptual and comprehension abilities.

If they have not got the right answers to the questions, then the teacher should present them with the extract from the recording which contains the evidence for the answer, and ask them what they think is being said at this point. One way of doing this is to repeatedly play the short extract, and ask student to write down (yes, this is dictation) what they hear. Even if students have successfully 'got the right answer' in the previous tests of understanding, this activity is likely to produce evidence of mishearing. (A way of thinking about such perception work is to treat it as research into second language listening: it is my experience that I learn a lot from students' constructive mishearing of what has been said.)

At this point it is essential to show the students a tapescript, so that they can see the gap between what they thought they heard, and what was said. This is the point in the listening class when we have the opportunity of actually teaching listening (which Field, 1998 argues for): we can help the students bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, but paradoxically it is the part of a listening comprehension class that is most often omitted, or to which least time is devoted. However teachers need more help at this point than their training provides for them. And this leads me into the second suggestion.

### **Suggestion 2: A fast speech phonology**

Teachers should be trained in 'observing' speech of all kinds, and particularly the authentic speech that now is a feature of many listening comprehension and general textbooks. This training does not currently take

place. The training they get is in the area of fixed position phonology for the teaching of pronunciation. This training is typically concerned with the articulation of minimal pairs of consonants and vowels so that teachers can explain to students how they can improve their pronunciation.

But these current approaches to 'phonology for pronunciation' do not give adequate preparation for dealing with the features of authentic fast speech, not even in the areas where they might be thought to do so: elision, assimilation, sentence stress, and intonation. The 'rules of speech' presented in such materials are derived from introspection concerning how decontextualised written sentences might be read aloud. These 'rules of speech' are inadequate to account for what happens in fast spontaneous speech.

There is therefore a need for a 'fast speech phonology' which prepares teachers to observe and explain the variability of fast speech. A major element of this training would be to encourage teachers to rid their minds of the expectations and rules they have inherited from fixed position phonology. As for what else might be included, Field (1998 p. 13) suggests features such as 'hesitations, stuttering, false starts, and long, loosely structured sentences'. To this list one can add all the features of speech described in Brazil (1994; 1997) – prominences, tone units of different sizes, tones, pitch height. One can also add the differences between citation and running forms of words, turn taking, accent, voice quality, and the effects of speed on speech.

### **Suggestion 3: Don't be over-charitable by avoiding fast speech**

Students will claim that fast speech is too difficult for them: and teachers will naturally want to give them easier, slower, scripted materials that they feel comfortable with. If this solution is adopted however, students will under-prepared to encounter and cope with the fast spontaneous speech that will come their way when they meet native speakers of English.

If the goal is to help students become better listeners, it is vital that they *learn to be comfortable* with fast speech. Someone who is *comfortable* with fast speech is:

1. equally familiar with the *running* and *citation* forms of words

2. capable of managing a productive balance between the effort to perceive words in tone units, and the effort to understand meanings of the speaker
3. capable of not worrying about stretches of speech which are beyond their capacity to understand

It will be objected that this can only happen with advanced students. I would argue that it is possible, indeed necessary, to aim at this type of comfort with all levels of students. And the way to do this is to spend more time in the post-listening phase helping students learn from those parts of the recording they have difficulty with – more work on perception.

### **In defence of perception exercises**

There was a time when listening comprehension exercises did involve perception exercises (cf. Field, 1998) but they have generally disappeared, a fact that Gillian Brown describes as 'a quite extraordinary case of throwing the baby out with the bath water' (1990, p. 145). Gillian Brown goes on to argue:

Students do ... need help in learning to interpret the spoken form of the language and, in particular, the form of the phonetic signal. What we need to do...is to think more carefully about the appropriate methodology...  
(Brown, 1990 p. 146).

Brown makes two important points: first we need to bring back perceptual work; second, we need to think carefully about how we do it. Clearly we have to balance the requirement to work on perception with the requirement to avoid straining for every word. Although at first sight it might seem impossible to reconcile these requirements, it is in fact quite easy to do so. For a 'non-straining' approach to listening, learners have to be made familiar and comfortable with the features of the stream of speech which most distinguish it from writing. Current approaches to Listening Comprehension are denying them the means of acquiring this comfort and familiarity.

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