

Facilitating second language listening comprehension: acquiring successful strategies

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This paper presents arguments for an emphasis on listening comprehension in language learning/teaching. An explanation of how listeners can use strategies to enhance the learning process is presented, with a review of the existing research base on how second language listening is taught. The major part of the paper presents and discusses pedagogical recommendations, as well as examples of performance checklists for developing metacognitive awareness.

Introduction

Listening comprehension is anything but a passive activity. It is a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance. Co-ordinating all of this involves a great deal of mental activity on the part of the listener. Listening is hard work, and deserves more analysis and support.

Listening comprehension as a separate and important component of language learning only came into focus after significant debate about its validity. Recent research has demonstrated the critical role of language input in language learning (e.g. Dunkel 1991, Feyten 1991), providing support for the primacy of listening comprehension in instructional methods. This has led Dunkel to assert that the study of listening comprehension has become the 'polestar' of second language acquisition theory building, research, and pedagogy.

This paper will explain how listening comprehension can enhance the process of language learning/acquisition, how listeners can use strategies to facilitate that process, and how teachers can nurture the development of these strategies.

Listening comprehension and language learning

As mentioned above, it is now generally recognized that listening comprehension plays a key role in facilitating language learning. According to Gary (1975), giving pre-eminence to listening comprehension, particularly in the early stages of second language teaching/learning, provides advantages of four different types: cognitive, efficiency, utility, and affective. The cognitive advantage of an initial

emphasis on listening comprehension is its respect for a more natural way to learn a language. To place speaking before listening, as advocated by the audio-lingual method, is to 'put the cart before the horse'. Processing and decoding auditory input requires recognition knowledge, whereas encoding and generating speech output requires retrieval knowledge. Insisting that learners produce what is not yet assimilated in long-term memory (LTM) leads to cognitive overload. This explains why, when students first begin to learn a language, they have difficulty listening for accurate meaning and learning to produce correct sounds at the same time. Short-term memory (STM) is not capable of retaining all of this information, so when learners are forced to speak before they are ready to do so, they have to resort to native language habits. Concentrating on speaking leaves little room for listening, and little room for comprehension; that is, understanding meaningful messages.

Closely related to the cognitive advantage is the efficiency advantage. Language learning can be more efficient if learners are not immediately required to produce all the language material to which they are exposed. This allows for more meaningful language use earlier in the course, since learners can use all of the limited attentional resources of STM to concentrate on meaning. This has been shown to enhance the acquisition of other language skills as well. A preliminary emphasis on listening is also more efficient, because students are exposed only to good language models (the teacher and realistic recordings) instead of the imperfect utterances of classmates. This makes more efficient use of everyone's time than the oral class, where one can spend a great deal of time waiting for answers that are slow in coming.

This leads to the third advantage: the usefulness of the receptive skill, or the utility advantage. Research has demonstrated that adults spend 40–50% of communication time listening, 25–30% speaking, 11–16% reading, and about 9% writing (Rivers in Gilman and Moody 1984: 331). It follows that language learners will make greater use of comprehension skills. Whereas speakers can, at their own pace, use paralinguistics and other communication strategies to maintain communication, listeners must adjust to the speaker's tempo and active vocabulary. This is probably the most important reason for teaching listening comprehension strategies, and provides the rationale for the continued inclusion of listening activities throughout a language programme, even at advanced levels.

The final advantage of an emphasis on listening comprehension is the psychological advantage. Without the pressure of early oral production there is less potential embarrassment about producing sounds that are difficult to master, especially for adults and teenagers. Once this pressure is eliminated, they can relax and focus on developing the listening skill, and on internalizing the rules which will facilitate the emergence of the other skills. Moreover, listening comprehension results in earlier achievement and a sense of success. The student has greater

motivation to continue learning; as one student commented to Rubin (1988: 1): 'I like this (exercise). It makes me feel smart.'

To conclude, listening comprehension is a highly integrative skill. It plays an important role in the process of language learning/acquisition, facilitating the emergence of other language skills. For these reasons, an awareness and deployment of effective listening comprehension strategies can help students capitalize on the language input they are receiving.

Listening comprehension strategies

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have validated a body of language learning strategies, and an accompanying classification scheme grounded in cognitive theory. They have differentiated and categorized the range of cognitive activity in language learning into two main types: metacognitive and cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies are important because they oversee, regulate, or direct the language learning process. These strategies, which involve thinking about the learning process, include planning, monitoring, and evaluating. However, without the deployment of appropriate cognitive strategies, the potential of these metacognitive strategies is curtailed. Cognitive strategies manipulate the material to be learnt or apply a specific technique to the learning task. A third category, socio-affective strategies, was added to describe learning that happens when language learners co-operate with classmates, question the teacher for clarification, or apply specific techniques to lower their anxiety level. See Vandergrift (1997b) for definitions and examples of listening strategies in each of the three strategy categories.

While second language strategy research has expanded in recent years, the number of studies in listening comprehension is relatively small, and the research base for listening strategies is even more limited (Rubin 1994). However, recent studies on the differences in strategy use between effective and less effective listeners point to the potential role of metacognitive strategies for enhancing success in second language listening (see, for example, O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Vandergrift 1997b). Furthermore, the few studies carried out in listening strategy instruction suggest that students can indeed be instructed in strategy use to enhance their performance on listening tasks.

A group of intermediate-level high school ESL learners received instruction in a metacognitive, a cognitive, and a socio-affective strategy for academic listening (O'Malley and Chamot 1990). Performance on a post-listening test was compared with two other groups: the first group received instruction in a cognitive and a socio-affective strategy only, the second was a control group, and received no strategy instruction. Results indicated that in each of the daily tests, the treatment group outperformed the control group, and that the metacognitive group outperformed the cognitive group on three of the four tests. The researchers concluded that strategy instruction could be effective in enhancing initial learning, and that teachers could do more than simply

provide comprehensible input by pairing learning strategy instruction with listening tasks.

The effect of different types of listening strategy instruction on performance was investigated by Rubin (1988) with high school learners of Spanish. The performance of three experimental groups was compared with that of two control groups in the comprehension of video. Although not all the hypotheses were confirmed, results demonstrated that the use of some listening strategies can help students work with more difficult material. In particular, the use of a storyline strategy enabled the students in the experimental groups to outperform those who were not instructed. Rubin concluded that 'the combination of well selected video and the acquisition of effective learning strategies can improve student affect and motivation' (p. 32).

Building on the above study, Thompson and Rubin (1996) investigated the effects of metacognitive and cognitive strategy instruction on the listening comprehension performance of university students learning Russian. The performance of an experimental group who received systematic instruction in listening strategies was compared to the performance of a similar group who received no instruction over a two-year period. Gain scores in the pre- and post-test after the two-year period demonstrated that the students who received strategy instruction in listening to video-recorded texts improved significantly over those who had received no instruction. With regard to instruction in listening to audio-recorded texts, the control also showed improvement, although this result did not reach significance. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence indicated that the use of metacognitive strategies helped students to manage their approach to listening.

Although the research base is not large, preliminary evidence indicates that instruction in strategies can help students to capitalize on the language input they receive, and to improve their performance on listening tasks.

*Teaching students
to become
strategically smart*

In addition to the preliminary evidence on strategy instruction presented above, research has pointed to the powerful role of metacognition in learning, and the potential for greater use of metacognitive strategies (see Vandergrift 1997b for references in both L1 and L2 learning). Given all of the above, ESL/EFL teachers would do well to create an awareness of and foster the acquisition of metacognitive strategies. The following suggestions can help teachers to develop 'metastrategic awareness' (Mendelsohn 1994) in their students, and in particular to develop transactional listening, where students listen to oral texts in order to obtain information and complete a comprehension task.¹

*Develop
metastrategic
awareness*

ESL/EFL teachers can discuss the concept of strategy in class and help their students to discover the kinds of strategies they use to understand spoken English. One interesting way of creating metastrategic awareness is to expose students to an oral text in a language other than

English, and discuss the different cues one can use to guess at the possible meaning of the text. Mendelsohn (1994) describes such an activity to sensitize students to the variety of cues for which one can listen for this purpose. Such an activity is particularly useful to students who are not conscious of and/or do not naturally transfer native language listening strategies to learning another language. It also develops the strategy of selective attention, an important metacognitive strategy.

Incorporate pre-listening and post-listening activities

The pedagogical sequence of pre-listening, listening and post-listening activities is not new (see, for example, Underwood 1989).² However, if used consistently, this sequence of teaching strategies can guide students through the mental processes for successful listening comprehension, and promote the acquisition of metacognitive strategies in three categories: planning, monitoring, and evaluating.

Teach students to plan for the successful completion of a listening task

Pre-listening activities are crucial to good second language pedagogy. During this critical phase of the listening process, teachers prepare students for what they will hear and what they are expected to do. First, students need to bring to consciousness their knowledge of the topic, their knowledge of how information is organized in different texts, and any relevant cultural information. Second, a purpose for listening must be established so that students know the specific information they need to listen for and/or the degree of detail required. Using all the available information, students can make predictions to anticipate what they might hear.

Pre-listening activities help students make decisions about what to listen for and, subsequently, to focus attention on meaning while listening. In order to encourage a personal approach to listening, and thereby foster autonomy during this phase, the teacher can encourage discussions, with the whole class or in pairs, on how different students prepare themselves for a particular listening task before beginning it.

Teach students how to monitor their comprehension during a listening task

During the listening activity itself, students continue to monitor their comprehension and make decisions about strategy use. They need to evaluate continually what they are comprehending for (1) consistency with their predictions, and (2) internal consistency, i.e. the ongoing interpretation of the oral text or interaction. Teacher intervention during this phase is virtually impossible, because of the ephemeral nature of listening. Periodic practice in decision-making skills and strategy use can sharpen inferencing skills and help students to monitor more effectively. Strategies to be practised include: logical inferencing and appropriate use of elaboration or world knowledge (see Mendelsohn 1994: 81–115), and word derivation skills. Furthermore, Willing (1989: 127–38) outlines some excellent activities for developing inferencing abilities in students at all levels of language learning.

An excellent activity for developing both planning and monitoring strategies is a form of the cloze exercise, using the written version of an

oral text. Students are given a written version of the oral text with individual words or parts of the text deleted. Before listening to the text, students are asked to read the text and to attempt to fill in the missing words. This helps students to use context to develop inferencing, and to predict the word(s) that they might hear. A class discussion, or work in pairs, will allow students to review difficulties and justify choices. A subsequent listening to the text promotes selective attention (planning) and verification of hypotheses (monitoring). A reflection on the activity (discussing the merits of the decisions made) will promote the strategy of evaluation.

Teach students to evaluate the approach and outcomes of a listening task

Students need to evaluate the results of decisions made during a listening task. The teacher can encourage self-evaluation and reflection by asking students to assess the effectiveness of strategies used. Group or class discussions on the approach taken by different students can also stimulate reflection and worthwhile evaluation. Students are encouraged to share individual routes leading to success, such as how someone guessed (inference) the meaning of a certain word, or how someone modified a particular strategy.

Development and use of listening comprehension checklists

In order to help students consciously focus on planning, monitoring, and evaluation before and after the completion of listening tasks, teachers can develop performance checklists such as the ones found in Appendices 1 and 2. Instruments such as these can guide students in preparing themselves for a particular listening task, and for evaluating their performance afterwards.

Appendix 1 encourages students to reflect on the different cognitive steps to be taken in preparing for a listening activity, and evaluating the subsequent results. After the pre-listening activities, students complete the first part of the checklist (Before listening), checking whether or not they have considered all the elements, and whether they have performed all the necessary steps for success, before they begin to listen. After listening and attempting to complete the listening task, students complete the second part (After listening), which will help them to evaluate their performance in a systematic fashion, particularly if they had difficulty completing the task. This self-evaluation will help students to adjust their strategies for the second attempt. Room for a written reflection at the bottom of the instrument encourages students to personally reflect on the process, and concretely state what they will do to improve their performance the next time.

This instrument can be adjusted as necessary. The number of elements can be reduced to the most pertinent if the teacher decides that the instrument is too cumbersome. It can also be translated into the first language of the learners, if one is working with a homogeneous group. A number of columns can be added so that the instrument can be used on a number of different dates (with room for reflective comments on the other side of the sheet). This checklist could then become part of the student portfolio, tracking progress over time.

Appendix 2 helps students to develop strategies for listening without the benefit of pre-listening activities. If students are to develop real-life listening skills (e.g. for understanding radio or television) they must learn to develop strategies that will help them understand the gist of a text, as well as the details that they need to know. Students listen to an oral text and attempt to identify main elements of the text. After the first listening they write their hypothesis for each element under the 'Guess' column, and under the 'Reasons' column state why/how they arrived at their hypothesis. Each student then works with a partner to compare answers and discuss potential discrepancies. On the basis of their discussion, they indicate other possibilities for which they will listen during the second time through the text. After the second listening, and subsequent class discussion to verify the answers, each student is encouraged to reflect on the process by identifying specifically what he or she will do differently next time.

Development and use of performance checklists can help students become more aware of the process of listening, allowing them to consciously intervene in the process by deploying efficient strategies. Focusing on the process as well as on the product of listening can help students to reflect on their learning, and encourage them consciously to adjust their strategies.

Conclusion An emphasis on listening comprehension, as well as the application of listening strategies, will help students to capitalize on the language input they receive, and to achieve greater success in language learning. Learning strategies are useful tools for students because they open up more reliable and less frustrating routes to language learning success. In particular, the use of listening strategies can make authentic texts more accessible in the early stages of learning a language, so that the process becomes more relevant and interesting for the learners. One final caveat should be noted: the process of developing useful listening strategies is best achieved when teachers provide students with abundant opportunities for listening practice outside of evaluation. Too often teachers only use listening activities to test the listening abilities of their students, which leads to anxiety and apprehension. This is not a context favourable to the acquisition of useful listening strategies.

This paper has argued that there are cognitive, efficiency, utility, and affective advantages for focusing on listening in language learning/teaching, that metacognitive strategies are crucial to success in listening comprehension, and that these strategies can be taught. Finally, in response to the theoretical claims, this paper has provided a framework for incorporating explicit strategy instruction into L2 classes, as well as some concrete activities for developing listening strategies.

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Notes

- 1 For an instructional sequence to teach reception strategies for interactive listening (where the listener plays a more active role in interaction with an interlocutor) see Vandergrift (1997a).
- 2 While the theory of this pedagogical sequence is well-known, Mendelsohn (forthcoming) found that there is still a very large gap between theory and practice. In a recent study of commercially published textbooks, he found that most texts provide little or no strategy instruction, and very little consciousness-raising on the role and usefulness of strategies in facilitating listening comprehension.

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Appendix 1 Student name: _____ Date: _____

Performance checklist for listening

Before listening	Yes
I understand the task (what I have to do after I have finished listening)	
I know what I must pay attention to while I listen	
I have asked the teacher for clarifications, if necessary	
I have attempted to recall all that I know about the topic	
I have attempted to recall what I know about the type of text I will listen to and the type of information I will probably hear	
I have made predictions on what I am about to hear	
I am ready to pay attention and concentrate on what I am about to hear	
I have encouraged myself	

After listening	Yes
I concentrated on the task to be accomplished	
I attempted to verify my predictions	
I revised my predictions accordingly	
I focused my attention on the information needed to accomplish the task	
I used background noises, tone of voice, and other clues to help me guess at the meaning of words I did not understand	
I used key words, cognates, and word families to understand the text	
I used my knowledge of the context and of text structure to understand the text	
I evaluated the logic/plausibility of what I understood	

(Place a check mark in the 'yes' column when verifying each statement)

In order to improve my performance, next time I will _____

Appendix 2 Name: _____ Date: _____

Performance checklist for listening comprehension

Question:	After first listening		Before second listening	
	Guess?	Reason(s)?	V	Other possibilities?
Where? (setting?)				
When? (time? time of day? season?)				
Who? (speakers? their relationship?)				
How? (tone? mood?)				
What? (What is it about?)				
Why? (goal? particular circumstances?)				

V= Verification (check in this column when your guess has been verified)

What I found easy: _____

What I found difficult: _____

What I will do the next time: _____

Source: Adapted from Mendelsohn (1994: 94)