

How Can Teachers Teach Listening?

The research findings discussed in the previous chapter have several important implications for teachers. Although many aspects of the traditional listening classroom remain the same as in the past, the current view of listening as a many-sided interactive process necessitates a more comprehensive approach to teaching listening to help learners meet the challenge of real-life listening. Although listening is an individual activity hidden in one's brain, the teaching and learning of how to listen could be taken out of students' private domain into the public space of the classroom. The focus of instruction changes from whether comprehension is achieved to how it is achieved.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- How was foreign language listening taught in your experience?

The Diagnostic Approach

Typically, teachers do some prelistening and then have students listen to the text and perform a variety of tasks. Teachers evaluate students' comprehension based on the correctness of their responses and proceed to the next activity. Implicit here is the focus on the result, the product of listening in the form of correct answers. This approach tests students' listening comprehension, informing them that they failed at certain points, but does little to teach how to listen, that is, to help

them understand what went wrong with their listening and how it could be repaired. Field (2008) calls for a *diagnostic approach* to listening, which allows teachers and students to attend to listening difficulties and practice strategies to diminish them. Characteristics of the approach are described in the following sections.

Using Incorrect Answers to Detect Weaknesses, and Designing Activities to Help

How often do teachers rush to supply a “correct” answer when a student fails to respond to a listening task? Teachers may play a recording several times and ask for other students’ input to make things right, missing an opportunity to determine the reason for the listening error. To revise this approach, a teacher could identify problems by making a note of students’ lapses in comprehension as she checks their answers. She would then discuss with students how they arrived at a certain answer, what prevented them from understanding parts of the text, and what could be done to improve their listening facilities. Finally, she would follow up with activities that target specific listening problems that emerged during the discussion. The aim is to increase students’ awareness of their listening processes and reinforce effective listening behaviors they can use when they face these problems again.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- How can teachers best determine whether their students understand the listening material they give them?

Avoiding Listening Tasks That Require Memorization

Understanding a message does not mean remembering every single detail, so students’ inability to recall information does not always signal a lack of comprehension. Yet some exercises—namely, multiple-choice and very specific questions—test listeners’ memory skills rather than focusing on the listening process. Instructors should try to include various types of comprehension questions that discuss the content of the text as well as invite students to examine their listening performance.

Helping Students Develop a Wider Range of Listening Strategies

Ineffective listeners rely on a single strategy (e.g., focusing on individual sentences, missing the relationship between ideas) without changing or adapting it. To cope with difficult texts more effectively, students should be exposed to a variety of strategies. Explaining, modeling, and regularly practicing with students how to set goals, plan tasks, self-monitor, and evaluate helps them control their listening. Anticipating content, inferring, guessing, and recognizing redundancies improves specific listening problems. Encouraging interaction with classmates and native speakers through listening expands communicative contexts and enhances self-confidence.

Effective strategy use does not happen by itself. Although the very idea of strategies may seem to be too abstract to students, teachers can help them appreciate the importance of strategies by including activities with a focus on their listening process. For example, students could discuss (in small groups or with the class) what they did to prepare for listening, follow the text, identify key points, and so forth. Or the class could share personal experiences with various listening tasks and develop a master list of effective strategies for different types of texts, adding to it as their strategic competence grows. To introduce a strategy, the teacher needs to get students to realize that there is a problem and a way of dealing with it. She could model the strategy by explaining what she does and why it is helpful in this particular case, and provide multiple opportunities to practice in different listening situations. Depending on the task, she also could remind students to be flexible in their choice of strategies and to employ strategic listening outside of the class.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Make a list of listening strategies you are familiar with. Are there any strategies that seem more important than others? Why?

Differentiating Between Listening Skills

By identifying a set of distinctive behaviors that work together toward comprehension, teachers allow learners yet another glimpse into the listening process. Listeners may be used to employing microskills in their native language, but specific activities need to be designed to help them transfer those skills into a new language. Although each skill could be practiced separately, the key to skills instruction is not to treat them as a laundry list of discrete practice points that students get or do not get. Rather, skill training should become a part of a larger listening proficiency picture, inviting students to try new behaviors in a variety of contexts and tasks.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What is the difference between strategies and skills? How can this awareness help in listening instruction?

Providing Top-Down and Bottom-Up Listening Practice

The fact that listening is a complex multistep procedure that involves different types of processing implies that both *top-down* and *bottom-up* skills should be practiced in the classroom. Although many teachers tend to favor such top-down activities as comprehension questions, predicting, and listing, listening practice should incorporate bottom-up exercises for pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary that allow learners to pay close attention to language as well.

Bottom-up processing helps students recognize lexical and pronunciation features to understand the text. Because of their direct focus on language forms at the word and sentence levels, bottom-up exercises are particularly beneficial for lower level students who need to expand their language repertoire. As they become more aware of linguistic features of the input, the speed and accuracy of perceiving and processing aural input will increase. To develop bottom-up processing, students could be asked to

- distinguish individual sounds, word boundaries, and stressed syllables
- identify thought groups

- listen for intonation patterns in utterances
- identify grammatical forms and functions
- recognize contractions and connected speech
- recognize linking words

Top-down processing relies on prior knowledge and experience to build the meaning of a listening text using the information provided by sounds and words. To arrive at a meaning of a text, the listener draws on her knowledge of the context, topic, speakers, situation, and the world, matching it to the aural input. Top-down listening skills include

- listening for gist, main ideas, topic, and setting of the text
- listening for specific information
- sequencing the information
- prediction
- guessing
- inferencing

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Look at the list of bottom-up and top-down skills and think of specific assignments that target those skills. For example, to develop a skill of identifying thought groups, students can mark them in a transcript while listening.

Skilled listeners simultaneously engage in top-down and bottom-up processing, using both types of skills to construct meaning. Although pedagogically people often practice them separately because of their distinctly different focus, they can be addressed within the context of a single listening text.

For example, students are going to *listen to a 2-minute-long conversation about getting around the city. Before they begin, they are asked to *listen to sentences giving and asking for directions from the conversation and repeat them, paying attention to the intonation, meaning, and grammatical structure of each phrase. They do *a fill-in-the-blank exercise, choosing an appropriate form of the verb.

They *listen to a short monologue and trace the speaker's route on the map. They practice *asking and answering questions about different locations on the map. They have *a class discussion about getting to campus by using different kinds of transportation. Next, students listen to the conversation several times. They start by *listening to the first 15 seconds of the recording to make predictions about the topic and the setting of the conversation; they will *check their predictions after listening. Other while-listening tasks include *summarizing the conversation, *answering comprehension questions, *ordering the possible routes mentioned by the speakers, *listening for the bus numbers, and *a cloze exercise. After listening, students *discuss their predictions, *practice saying numbers, *act out situations asking for and giving directions, and *write a story based on a picture which clearly involves finding one's way in the city.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Categorize each of the starred activities above as either top-down or bottom-up. What is the objective of each?

The Role of Students

The process view of listening has changed the role of the listener from someone who was thought to passively receive the spoken message to an active participant in the act. Translated into the realities of classroom teaching it means that students take responsibility for their own learning how to listen. Instead of ingesting language and content, responding to comprehension questions when asked, and receiving instruction, they interact with the text and the task at many levels. They construct meaning by drawing on their schemata and switching between bottom-up and top-down processing. They employ a variety of strategies and skills, and discuss their effectiveness with their classmates. They rely on metacognitive abilities to overcome difficulties and seek additional opportunities to listen outside of class. By actively attending to their listening needs, learners improve performance in listening and learning the second language.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Vandergrift and Goh (2012) maintain that learners need to control their listening. What does such control involve? Why is it important? What activities would help students develop control over their listening process?

Another very important aspect of active listening is its social dimension. A typical listening textbook as well as most teacher-made material contains only recorded speech. Thus students cannot rely on facial expressions and body language to gain valuable cues to meaning, and they are missing the opportunity to communicate with the speaker as well. To approximate real-life listening experiences, students can be grouped or paired up to practice showing understanding or incomprehension, asking questions, agreeing or disagreeing with the speaker, and interrupting when appropriate.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- As you read the following partial script of a lesson for low–intermediate students, think about the focus of listening instruction in this class. What is its main goal? What roles do the teacher and students play in this class? Consider the pros and cons of this approach. What would you do differently and why?

Teacher: We are going to watch a video about a Thanksgiving holiday celebration in the United States. What do you think people will be talking about at such a party? (*Students answer.*) Have you ever been to a U.S. Thanksgiving meal? (*Students answer.*) What is it like? (*Students answer.*) How about your country? Do you have something like that? A day of giving thanks? Is it different than in the United States? (*Students answer.*)

Teacher: OK, very good. Now, here are some words that we've learned. (*Points students to a vocabulary box on a worksheet*) You have to group them according to three categories. (*Gives students time to finish*) What do you have under beverages? (*Students answer.*) How

about food? (*Students answer.*) What did you put into greetings? (*Students answer.*) What other U.S. traditions do you know of? (*Students answer.*) What could you add to each category? (*Students answer.*)

Teacher: Let's watch the video now. As you listen to the conversation, try to find answers to the questions on your handout. Let's read the questions together to make sure we understand them. (*Students read and discuss questions.*) OK, let's watch it.

After watching:

Teacher: What did you choose for the first question? Does everybody agree? What do you have, Fahd? What else do you have here? Oh . . . I think he said, *delicious*. Let's listen to this piece again. (*Students again watch the segment they did not understand.*) Did you hear that? (*Students nod.*) OK, question number two. (*Students answer.*) Right. How about number three? (*Students answer.*) Nobody got that? Let me go back there. (*Plays the segment again*) Did you get it? (*Students shake their heads.*) She says, *the last harvest*. OK. Number four. Why was he late? Tagrid, what's your answer? (*Student answers.*) Romina, what do you have? (*Student answers.*) Good job, everyone! We are going to watch it again. This time we'll focus on expressions they use at the table. Look at exercise number two on your handout. As you listen, circle the expressions they use. Did you find the exercise? (*Students nod.*) Any questions? (*Students say no.*) Are you ready?

After second viewing:

Teacher: So, what can you say to invite everybody to have a seat at the table? (*Students answer.*) What else can you say? (*Students answer.*) Pei-Chan? (*Student answers.*) Good! What does Shelly say to get the gravy? (*Students answer.*) How about drinks? How do you ask for a drink? (*Students answer.*) And if you don't want it? (*Students answer.*) All right. What did the hostess say to offer food? (*Students answer.*) Yes. And how did the guests thank her? (*Students answer.*) Very good! You got it!

Teacher: Now that you've learned the phrases, let's role-play. Imagine that there is a Thanksgiving dinner, and you are invited. Two students will be the hosts, the others will be the guests. Try to use the expressions we've learned. I'll put them on the board. (*Students work in groups.*)

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What characteristics make a good teacher of second language listening skills?

When teachers teach, they seem to take charge of everything. They select input, design and sequence activities, determine tasks, and decide what constitutes a correct response. When several students give the desired answer, the teacher acknowledges their effort and moves on, never pausing to think if everyone in the class understood the text, and if not, what caused their confusion. When students make a mistake, teachers deem it their professional duty to immediately correct it. By doing that, teachers hope they are keeping the lesson going and also helping learners avoid the same mistake in the future. This approach puts the teacher in control of classroom activity and allows students to check the accuracy of their responses, but does it change students' listening behavior?

In a process-oriented classroom, the teacher assumes a more supportive role, facilitating rather than controlling and testing listening. She continues to manage the classroom business of planning, implementing, and assessing listening while taking a noninterventional stance in listening instruction (Field, 2008). Instead of presenting students with the correct answer, she guides them in comparing responses and reflecting on different steps they took to achieve comprehension. She encourages students to become aware of their listening, monitors their efforts, and provides feedback on their performance.

It is essential that students receive feedback immediately after the task, while they still remember the activity. At the same time, teachers do not want to embarrass weaker listeners in front of their classmates, so the discussion of common errors and ways to avoid them should be impersonal and nonjudgmental (*There were some problems with . . .* instead of *You made a mistake in . . .*). Personal feedback can be spoken or written; a quick in-class conference right after the activity may be followed by an email message with observations and suggestions after

class. Individual comments should be transparent, targeting specific strengths and weaknesses and providing tips for improvement. A good strategy is to start with a general positive statement (*You did a great job understanding all the reasons the speaker stated*), mention areas for improvement (*I didn't see you taking notes while listening. Did you pay attention?*), and finish with encouragement (*You managed to understand a lot from the text*) to sustain confidence and create a positive listening environment where students are not afraid to try new strategies, make guesses, and discuss. To relieve anxiety associated with listening in a foreign language, I also tell my students about my own auditory problems (such as replaying phone messages eight times to get the phone number) and find ways to praise even their smallest successes to give them a sense of accomplishment.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What are your thoughts on the use of peer feedback in teaching second language listening in terms of its value, appropriateness, practicality, and guidance for students?
- Imagine that a friend is learning a new language and finds understanding oral speech particularly difficult. What suggestions could you give her to help her succeed?