What Do Teachers Know About Listening?

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

● How would you define listening? Is it the same as hearing?

If your definition of listening refers to such concepts as interpretation, meaning, or comprehension, you have managed to capture its complex nature. When people listen, they interpret the incoming sounds and pick up important words from the flow of speech to construct meaning. They also make guesses about what they are going to hear next and check the new information against their predictions and knowledge of the world. Listeners use strategies to cope with difficulties of listening in real time. They try to remember at least part of what they heard and prepare an appropriate response in the case of face-to-face interaction. These processes are not separate; they happen simultaneously in the listener's mind and are inter-related with each other. This is why listening is described as an active skill: although their efforts are invisible, listeners must work very hard to make sense of aural input.

As a person hears a message, it enters the sensory memory, where it is stored in its original form for about a second. In this time, the brain distinguishes it from other noises, recognizes words of the language, groups them together, and either forwards the input to the short-term memory or deletes it depending on the quality, urgency, and source of the sound. The short-term memory keeps the input for a brief period to analyze it against the listener's existing body of knowledge. After the message has been understood by associating it with or differentiating it from the other information, it can be retained in the long-term memory forever. The brain, memory, and speech recognition processes are included in the cognitive dimension of listening (Vandergrift & Goh, 2009).

Equally important is the social dimension of listening, which accounts for its communicative nature. In face-to-face interaction, listeners are expected to show understanding by nodding, saying utterances such as *really* and *uh-huh*, making comments, and taking turns participating in the conversation. Even in a less reciprocal situation, such as a lecture, the listener could have an opportunity to respond, for example, by offering questions and observations. The social dimension of listening also includes gestures, body language, and other nonverbal signals, as well as pragmatic aspects of listening, which allow listeners to make inferences about the speaker's intention and determine implied meaning to respond in socially appropriate ways in a variety of situations (Vandergrift & Goh, 2009).

The cognitive and social processes of listening are generally similar in any language. Listeners who are nonnative English speakers (NNESs), however, face a number of additional hurdles in their efforts to understand spoken language.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- Reflect on some of the ways that listening to a nonnative language could be difficult.

Listeners may miss part or all of a message in their native language because they forgot what was said or could not hear very well. They also tend to tune out if a listening text is extremely long or uninteresting, or if they are distracted; however, their native knowledge of the language and culture helps them make sense of the input even if they failed to hear it in its

entirety. Matters become more complicated when people listen to a foreign language, especially if they do not know it very well. Sounds blend together into a continuous stream; listeners get so caught up listening for individual words that they lose the thread of the conversation. Add to this situation the difficulty of different accents, colloquialisms, and fast-paced native speech, and listeners may quickly become confused. The short-lived nature of listening (as opposed to writing, where the words stay on paper) also increases the challenge: it is impossible to preview or review the message.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Does practice make perfect when teaching listening? Will students be able to understand more as they listen more?

The Process View of Listening

For a long time, listening instruction emphasized the importance of practice in achieving comprehension. Students were presented with text after text in the hope that extended exposure would improve listening comprehension with little or no analysis of how this comprehension was achieved. This method is called the *product approach* to listening. The emphasis on the product of instruction assumes that the listener receives the message and produces a single possible response to demonstrate his or her understanding (Field, 2008). It means that correct answers to questions and fill-in-the-blank exercises determine successful comprehension. The wrong answers indicate that the listener's comprehension failed at some point; the teacher would address the language and meaning mistakes but not the processes that led to misunderstanding, so the student may well have the same difficulty in a similar listening situation.

To better understand the nature of listening comprehension, the *process view* of listening was adopted. It highlights the fact that, rather than simply taking the information in and getting the meaning out, listeners process input to create meaning from the incoming sounds and their own knowledge of the world. The process model treats listening as a complex interaction of cognitive, affective, and social variables to ensure reception, processing, and understanding of a spoken message (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Essential to successful comprehension are the listener's background knowledge and its influence on perception and memory. These are usually described in terms of the *schema theory*, which is based on the idea that all the knowledge that people carry in their minds is organized into interrelated patterns, or *schemata* (the plural of schema). A schema is a mental image of a particular situation or event, made up from previous encounters with similar events. There are two types of schema: *content*, which refers to general knowledge and life experience, as well as relevant knowledge of the subject matter, and *formal*, which reflects the listener's awareness of text types and genres. A *cultural schema*, which is also sometimes mentioned, describes familiarity with sociocultural norms of a given community.

In the process of listening, people invoke different types of schemata to render the meaning of the message. For example, when English native speakers from the United States hear the word *parade*, they think about people lining the streets to watch floats and marching bands. This is their schema for *parade*, which is very different from mine. I grew up in the Soviet Union, so my mental picture of a parade always involves military troops marching on Moscow's Red Square amid red flags. People all have their own personal schemata shaped by their experiences; they understand new information by relating it to an existing schema and predicting what they might hear next. The concept of schema highlights the importance of background knowledge in listening.

Genre-based Listening

The concept of schema, particularly formal schema, has a strong bearing on genre and text-type awareness in the listening classroom. While the two terms are often used interchangeably, distinguishing between these concepts is important for teaching listening. Real-life listening involves attending to many different types of texts, each of which displays its own linguistic features, structure, and function. A *genre* refers to a group of texts that represent a communicative event performed by society member(s) for a certain purpose (Paltridge, 2001). This body of texts collectively reflects a typical way language users respond to a particular situation or achieve a certain communicative goal. An actual phone message left on your answering machine is a text type; its general content and order (greeting, introduction, brief statement of purpose, call back number, closing) is typical for the genre of phone messages. Genres can be written (a letter) and spoken (a joke). Although genre knowledge is largely subconscious, society members display genre awareness when they recognize organizational and linguistic patterns of certain groups of texts and select an appropriate genre.

The notions of *genre* and *text type* complement each other. A single genre (e.g., a conversation) can display different text types, such as instruction, narrative, compare-and-contrast, or opening and closing the dialogue. Likewise, the same text type may feature in several genres; for example, description can be used in stories, advertisements, and reports. The purpose of communication, the context, and the culture of the society in which they are used shape both text type and genre, because different cultures have their unique ways of communicating. Thus, in contrast to some students' home academic cultures, a casual atmosphere in most U.S. classrooms implies conversational-style interaction and a rather informal use of language in spoken exchanges with instructors.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- Think of a recent listening event (e.g., a casual conversation, a lecture, a certain TV program). Can you outline a pattern of language use typical for that genre?

Bottom-Up and Top-Down Processing

When listeners listen, they make sense of the incoming information in two different ways. *Bottom-up processing* refers to deriving meaning from individual lexical, grammatical, and pronunciation items. It underlies the decoding process, from sounds to words and grammatical relations between them, to sentences leading to overall comprehension. *Top-down processing* operates with existing schemata, ideas, and content. Rather than relying on discrete segments, people let their knowledge and expectations guide their understanding of what they hear. The two processes complement each other; the choice of one over the other depends on the topic, content, and type of the text. An example from my experience with audiobooks shows how top-down and bottom-up processes work together to ensure comprehension: I was enjoying Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* and came across the phrase "Langdon has hung NE PAS DERANGER signs on hotel room doors to catch the gist of the captain's orders." The bottom-up processing activated my minimal knowledge of French to understand the negation. The mention of hotel room doors invoked my general knowledge of hotels and made me think about *Do not disturb* signs before the next phrase, "Fache and Langdon were not to be disturbed under any circumstances," confirmed my guess.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Read the following text or choose a lecture from http://ocw.mit .edu/courses/audio-video-courses. As you listen or read, take note of what you do to understand the content. Do you rely on top-down or bottom-up processing? When? What else do you do to get the meaning?

> Most spoken text differs in many ways from written text; therefore, the object of listening is different from that of reading. A comparison of a transcribed spoken text and a written text is likely to reveal a number of significant differences. Spoken text is fragmented (loosely structured) and involved (interactive with the listener). Written text, on the other hand, is integrated (densely structured) and detached (lacking in interaction with the listener). These functional distinctions are realized in certain linguistic features (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p. 48).