

NEW LISTENING STRATEGIES FOR A NEW GENERATION: USING NEW TECHNOLOGIES TO UPDATE LISTENING COMPREHENSION ACTIVITIES

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Resumen

La comprensión auditiva, como destreza especial del campo de la enseñanza de lenguas, es una habilidad difícil de enseñar y aprender. Últimamente, además, se ha convertido en un desafío aún mayor, debido al uso generalizado de una lengua “real”, con sonidos ambiente, una velocidad de conversación natural, dubitaciones, interrupciones, uso de diversos acentos...Este artículo resume y refleja la necesidad de mejorar la “metacognición” a través de la enseñanza de estrategias auditivas según se ha visto en investigaciones recientes centradas en el complejo proceso cognitivo que implica la comprensión auditiva. No solo se tiene que prestar atención a las habilidades de percepción y a un enfoque “bottom-up”, también hay que tener en cuenta las estrategias “top-down”. Debido a las dificultades encontradas en el entendimiento de textos orales por parte de los estudiantes y considerando los avances en la tecnología, se debería tener más en cuenta un mayor uso de materiales audiovisuales, ya que ayudan a una mejor contextualización y proporcionan mayores pistas visuales, para un mejor entendimiento por parte de los alumnos. El material audiovisual está más al alcance en la vida cotidiana de nuestros alumnos y debería ser un recurso más aprovechado por los profesores de idiomas, para poder desarrollar así las habilidades auditivas de los alumnos.

Palabras clave: la enseñanza, comprensión auditiva, audiovisual, las estrategias, la tecnología.

Abstract

Listening, as a discrete skill within language teaching, is recognized as a difficult skill to learn and teach. It has perhaps become more challenging recently due to the current emphasis on using ‘real’ language, with background noise, at a natural speed, with hesitations, interruptions, fillers etc. combined with the use of a variety of accents. This article summarises and reflects on research which has focused on both the complex cognitive processes involved in listening and the need to improve students metacognition through the teaching of listening strategies. While perception skills and bottom-up approaches to listening need to be attended to, top-down strategies also need to be taught. Given the difficulties experienced by learners in understanding oral texts, and advances in technology, video materials should be exploited more than audio, as they help set context and provide many visual clues enabling listeners to understand more easily. Video has become far more accessible and present in the everyday lives of our students and should be exploited more by (English) language teachers to develop their listening skills.

Keywords: teaching, listening, video, listening strategies, technology.

1. The development of listening as a separate skill

Teaching listening as a separate skill within English Language Teaching has only existed since the late 1960s, and has changed a great deal since those days. The listening component first entered the Cambridge First Certificate exam in 1970 and until 1984 listening texts were simply written texts read aloud (Fields, 2008). According to Osada (2004), in the 1970s the status of listening increased from being “peripheral” to being of “central importance”, in the 80s researchers became “ increasingly

interested in exploring the intricacies of this complex skill” and in the 90s attention to the skill “increased dramatically”. It has been increasingly acknowledged as a highly active skill rather than a passive one.

Communicative teaching methods, alongside major developments in technology, have contributed towards changing the teaching of listening. Furthermore, recent research has focused more on the process of listening rather than the product, and has encouraged the use of metacognitive strategies in listening comprehension. The original model developed in those early days including pre-listening, listening and post-listening tasks has been developed, although that basic structure remains predominant in the language classroom. However, just as the widespread availability of tape-recorders and language laboratories facilitated an emphasis on listening as a discrete and important skill in itself within language teaching, the recent revolutions in technology and their widespread availability now enable further changes and modernisations in listening comprehension teaching methods. Teachers and students must take full advantage of new technologies to update and improve methods used to help students with their listening comprehension skills.

It now seems outdated, for example, to rely so heavily on audio, and so little on video. Authenticity of texts and tasks has become a key concept in the field of English language teaching recently, and yet in modern day life, especially among the young people who we predominantly teach, video through the Internet (YouTube and videos posted on other websites and social networks), television series and film make up a large part of media which is being accessed, more so than audio content such as radio and podcasts. This changing cultural / technological scene should be exploited by English language teachers to improve our students’ listening skills.

2. The cognitive processes involved in listening

Listening is a completely different skill from reading in part due to its transitory nature. This makes it more challenging because students cannot go back over something they are not sure about, they can not control the speed, if they ‘get stuck’ on a word or two they will have then missed the next part. It also requires good short-term memory to retain the previous information. Besides this, listening to monologues or dialogues in a classroom situation does not allow learners to use any communication strategies to clarify meaning or ask the speaker to repeat or slow down. In other words it is easy to fail to understand, as there are many hurdles to overcome when listening. Research into this area of the cognitive processes involved in listening by Anderson (1995; as cited in Goh 2000 p.56), Goh (2000) and Vandergrift (2004), amongst others, shows the complexity of these processes. Employing top-down strategies in listening require the use of world knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and knowledge of the context and of the speaker operating within it, as necessary elements to enable learners to tackle listening texts, and achieve overall comprehension. All of this information helps learners to infer overall meaning from oral texts. Bottom-up processes involve understanding the phonemes, the words, the chunks of language and the discourse. Vandergrift (2004) concludes that both top-down and bottom-up processes “interact freely with each other to help listeners construct a meaningful interpretation of what they hear” (2004:14). Learners may use the

two approaches simultaneously. He advocates the need for a balance between these two approaches as the key to successful second language listening.

3. The difficulties of listening in L2.

Given the complex cognitive processes involved, listening is indeed a difficult skill to teach and to research, given its covert nature (we are unable to see the processes involved). Add to this the fact that the emphasis on using true-to-life conversations, with background noise, at a natural speed, with hesitations, interruptions, fillers etc. of real speeches and conversations, combined with the recent emphasis on exposing listeners to different accents, (rather than the outdated Received Pronunciation), have all made listening an even more difficult skill to acquire. The listening process is often anxiety-producing as a result. In short, there are many factors which can lead to a breakdown in comprehension. Anecdotally, in my University we have noticed students complaining about the difficulty of listening, more than the other three skills, despite candidates having plenty of practice using current listening comprehension teaching methods, and therefore analysing the possible reasons for this and seeking ways to overcome these difficulties is important.

4. New technologies for a new generation: video as an aid to assist listening comprehension.

Using video would be a way of aiding students with using top-down processes to decipher listening texts, by providing visual information such as body language, gestures, expressions and other vital clues regarding the contexts, the speakers, and all of the information which has to be provided during the pre-listening stage to enable students to activate the schemata, understand the context, relationship between the speakers etc. Using video mirrors real-life situations more accurately than having to listen 'blindly, without any visual clues. In reality, nowadays, video communication technology such as Skype is overtaking the use of landlines (Graddol, 2006), on-demand video content is used more than radio, and so on, while a wide range of authentic video content is now available to teachers to use in class, and students at home, providing there is Internet access. Overdependence on audio should be a thing of the past and could help compensate for the increased demands on students due to the use of authentic features in listening texts. Furthermore, using video as a tool for developing listening skills can be motivating and interesting for students. By providing the links to the videos online, students can watch again at home after class, if necessary.

5. Are top-down or bottom-up strategies most important to teach?

Osada (2001, as cited in Vandergrift, 2004 p.8) argues for more emphasis on using a top-down cognitive processing approach because beginner learners cannot construct overall meaning when they are still deciphering speech at a word-by-word basis and are not able to process the auditory information, the connected speech, in real-time. They have to learn to infer meaning, and learn to listen for gist using a top-down approach. Osada believes that there is an over-emphasis on bottom-up processing. Opinions differ as to which approach should be emphasised. In Goh's (2000) study of Chinese learners and her analysis of why they failed to understand listening texts, it was shown that of

the ten top problems that the students faced which led to a breakdown in understanding listening texts, five were linked to perceptual processing (with three linked to parsing and two to utilisation). For example, they did not recognise words they knew (they recognised them by sight but not by sound, or had remembered their pronunciation or word stress wrongly). This study shows that bottom-up processing is vital in understanding listening texts too. In fact both approaches are important and this depends somewhat on the nature of the listening task, whether it requires listening for specific information or for gist (overall meaning) for example.

6. Helping students to learn to listen.

Training in perception skills, then, is vital to successful listening. Students have to learn to identify words and identify them within connected speech. Hulstijn (2003: as cited in Vandergrift, 2004 p.14) argues for the emphasis to be put on bottom-up skills such as word recognition and word segmentation, and alongside colleagues has developed a software programme (123LISTEN) which allows teachers to segment digitized video or audio texts into short chunks, with each chunk accompanied by a transcript. Students can use this tool to practise alone, by listening and trying to understand before consulting the text display to verify their predictions. This perception training, a vital part of learning to listen, particularly when listening for specific information, can be practised independently by students at their own pace, using this software or similar technologies or websites. Krashen referred to the concept of ‘narrow listening’ (1996: as cited in Vandergrift, 2004 p. 16) whereby students choose the type of oral texts they are interested in, in order to listen extensively. Large amounts of comprehensible input are essential for students in language learning, he argued. Using DVDs or TV on demand with subtitles in English is one way of doing this and again, the advances in technology enable learners to access these authentic listening/viewing materials, through language options on smart TVs, as well as DVDs and websites on laptops, tablets or mobile phones. Markham, Peter and McCarthy (2001: as cited in Vandergrift, 2004 p. 7) compared the effects of using captions on intermediate-level learners of Spanish and found that those watching with English subtitles outperformed those watching with Spanish subtitles and they, in turn, outperformed those with no captions, and therefore they recommended students to progress through this cycle of using L1 captions to L2 captions, in order to practise and improve their listening.

7. Metacognitive strategies in listening

Vandergrift (2004) has linked metacognitive strategies to the stages of listening instruction within a lesson. These stages and strategies are vital in teaching students how to listen and for them to be aware of the processes involved so that they can use the strategies at home with their own authentic texts. Using predicting as a pre-listening activity, then monitoring their predictions during a first listening, comparing what they have written with peers, and deciding what other details they need to know, and then verifying again through a second listening, and later discussing results as a whole class to reconstruct or re-tell the details of the listening text, with a final reflection stage, together make up a logical way of constructing a sequence of learning events. This more developed approach of making students aware of the metacognitive processes involved in listening can indeed help

students to learn how to listen effectively and is a learning process that students can then use independently using authentic resources which they can access via the Internet. It has been proposed as a way of shifting the emphasis away from the need to get correct answers (the product) onto the processes involved in effective listening, and in doing so could empower the learner to learn independently. The limitations of this process approach are that it is “presently only supported by anecdotal evidence and qualitative studies, which show positive student attitudes and growing metacognitive awareness of the process of listening”, as Vandergrift himself acknowledges (2004:12).

8. Recent research on teaching listening strategies

However, since Vandergrift wrote those words, in the last decade more research has been published concerning learners perceptions of using listening strategies and research indicates that incorporating teaching of metacognition results in increased performance in L2 listening (Lemmer, 2009; Bidabadi & Yamat, 2013). Bidabadi & Yamat’s study of 84 Iranian TEFL students (2013) found that they used all four of Vandergrift’s metacognitive strategy types (2006), namely *planning and evaluation*, *directed knowledge*, *problem-solving* and *personal knowledge* (controlling anxiety, confidence); that the most frequently used was *directed knowledge* (sustaining concentration and so on) and that these strategies should be included in EFL resources. Lemmer (2009) describes in detail his advanced listening course in Japan which tackled various metacognitive strategies and concluded that significant improvements in listening scores were achieved after students had completed the course.

9. Recent research involving using new technologies.

Vandergrift (2007) notes the developments in new technologies and argues that more research is needed into how these technologies are being used, and what choices are now available to the language learner, as well as raising a multitude of other questions which warrant further research. He questions whether listeners are able to transfer listening skills acquired through various new technologies into ‘real-life’ for example. Since these observations by Vandergrift, technology has raced ahead, and continues to do so, and is a large part of ‘real-life’, particularly with the use of smartphones, iPads and smart TVs, making on-demand video content even more present in the lives of everyone, especially the younger generations. One of Lemmer’s (2009) conclusions is that video content should be used so that students can determine context more easily, better infer meaning of unknown vocabulary and see gestures and expressions of speakers. He also points out that using video is less artificial. Brown (2007, as cited in Lemmer, 2009) found that visual clues help motivation as well as helping understanding.

10. Innovations to improve listening in the language classroom.

English Language teachers can, and should, make use of authentic video content from a whole host of websites such as CNN ([ww.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com)), BBC news (www.bbc.com/news), The Economist

(www.economist.com/multimedia) if teaching media students for example, or websites such as the UK National health service website (<http://www.nhs.uk/Video/Pages/>), www.thesite.com (which deals with young people's health and emotional concerns), or charity/NGO websites such as Oxfam, www.ageuk.org etc. These are just a few examples of websites which have plenty of short, and often clear, videos. These websites, as well as videos on YouTube, can be of particular use for teaching listening within ESP courses, or in bilingual teaching, as well as in more general English courses. Short videos with easier, clear language content can be selected by teachers from such websites, and when used along with transcripts provided by teachers, are a good and unlimited source of listening materials on every topic. In addition, many newer course books such as the *Speakout* series by Pearson, or the *global* series by Macmillan among others, now provide video content with listening activities and, in my experience, students find these materials motivating and accessible. Short web-based videos are accessible both in terms of being free and easy to access online, and often accessible linguistically, in terms of being short, clear and easy to understand.

11. Conclusion

New technologies mean new realities and for younger learners in particular they have become an essential part of life and the learning process. They open up new and exciting possibilities for teaching listening skills and strategies, and for English language teaching as a whole. Twenty-first century research has enhanced our understanding of the complex cognitive demands that listening involves, and listening in L2 is even more difficult. This frequently perceived difficulty of listening, which can cause anxiety in learners further impeding their performance, can be overcome in several ways. Firstly, through an understanding of where comprehension breaks down for which we owe much to Anderson (1995), Goh (2000) and others due to their analysis of cognitive processing in L2 listening, and subsequently attention being paid by teachers to all stages in the comprehension process (perception, parsing and utilization). The use of bottom-up and top-down cognitive strategies need to be employed by learners to overcome their difficulties, so these must be taught. Secondly, metacognition needs to be addressed and learners need to be made more aware of listening strategies through inclusion in courses and textbooks, to enable them to become autonomous learners and improve their listening. Finally, learner difficulties can be eased and supported by a full exploitation of new technologies, in particular websites with video content alongside subtitles and transcripts, as opposed to audio. The visual clues provided by using video can help counteract the difficulties involved in L2 listening with all its authentic features such as accent, hesitations, fillers as well as the intrinsic difficulties of a language such as English, such as connected speech, weak forms etc. We have only begun to scratch the surface of the potential inherent in new technologies, and further research will help guide us more accurately in finding the most efficient ways to improve our students listening abilities.

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