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Listening Comprehension in Foreign Language Instruction

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This document addresses a range of theoretical and practical issues concerned with the teaching of listening comprehension, a crucial component of foreign language instruction. More specifically, it addresses the following questions: 1) what is listening comprehension? and 2) how can we teach our students to be effective listeners? To address these questions, we begin with an overview of what we know about the processes involved in listening comprehension and review the most prominent models of listening comprehension, i.e. bottom-up, top-down and interactive. Next we present a model of L2 listening comprehension which primarily involves bottom-up/top-down/interactive processes but also includes individual, social and cultural dimensions. Finally, we examine three major approaches to listening comprehension instruction, i.e. discrete-point, integrative and communicative, and discuss how foreign language teachers can make sound pedagogical choices about how to teach and assess their students' listening comprehension.

What do we currently know about listening comprehension?

In language pedagogy, text comprehension has always been a central aspect of listening and reading instruction. Over the last several decades comprehension research has yielded several models that have attempted to explain the process involved in both reading and listening comprehension. Written and spoken texts require the same processing, i.e. to understand a text readers and listeners must activate their linguistic as well as prior knowledge of the world. However, when listening to oral texts, listeners deal with a number of features unique to spoken discourse only, i.e. sound modification, prosodic characteristics (e.g. stress, intonation), hesitations, the involuntary breaks, ellipses, redundancy, the grammatical reconstruction of utterances, repetitions and corrections etc. (e.g. Kinginger, 1998; Rost, 2002; Buck, 2003). The most widely known text comprehension processing models are *bottom-up*, *top-down* and *interactive*. The *bottom-up model* of listening comprehension, developed in the 1940s and 1950s, involves the ability to recognize the linguistic features of the language. That is, the bottom-up model is based on the L2 learners' knowledge of the language itself (words, syntax, grammar) and the ability to use that knowledge to process the information in texts.

The *top-down model* of listening comprehension contends that the decoding of verbal messages depends more on listeners' prior knowledge of the world and/or the topic of the text than on knowledge of the language itself or its acoustic signals (Bernhardt, 1991; Carell, Devine, Eskey, 1991; Swaffar Arens, & Byrnes ,1991; Kern, 2000, Buck,

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2003; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). In this regard, schema theory attempts to explain how prior knowledge, or schemata, proposed by Rumelhart and Ortony (1977), aids in text comprehension. According to Rumelhart and Ortony, schemata are structures that are stored in memory and represent knowledge of events that repeatedly occurred in individuals' previous cognitive experience, e.g. going to a grocery store, being in an airport or checking in to a hotel. As soon as the structures of a particular event are "stored as a schema in memory, it aids individuals in negotiating future events, in allowing them to predict what is likely to happen" (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p. 26). In terms of listening comprehension, Buck (2003) similarly explains that in many cases listeners are able to foresee the meaning of a word before deciphering its phonemes and, being involved in a concrete situation, they can anticipate, using their prior knowledge, what they will hear. Thus, text comprehension depends on L2 listeners'/readers' familiarity with the topic of the text and whether or not they share the same previous knowledge with the person producing a spoken or written message (Bernhardt, 1991; Kern, 2000).

Since listening comprehension is a complex multidimensional process in which many factors come into play, the *interactive model* of text comprehension argues that learners employ their prior contextual knowledge (top-down process) as well as their L2 knowledge (bottom-up process). Thus, both text processing models are called for if we are to view text comprehension as an interactive process. In this fashion, Rost (2002) explains how these two processes operate in listeners as follows:

> Speech perception and word recognition are the **'bottom-up' processes** in listening: they provide the 'data' for comprehension. If the listener does not recognize enough of these bottom-up cues in order to process the speech in real time, he or she will rely more exclusively on **'top-down' processes** semantic expectations and generalizations. (Bold in the original, p. 96)

Rost (2002) also provides a definition of text comprehension which integrates both of the text processing models and which nicely summarizes the present discussion on this complex process:

> Comprehension is the process of relating language to concepts in one's memory and to references in the real world. Comprehension is the sense of understanding what the language used refers to in one's experience or in the outside world. 'Complete comprehension' then refers to the listener having a clear concept in memory for every referent used by speaker. (p. 59)

Instructionally, language pedagogy acknowledges that listening comprehension is a complex ability in which bottom-up and top-down processes are involved. These processes occur concurrently and actively interact with one another. Our discussion now moves to a model of second language listening comprehension that accounts for both bottom-up and top-down processes while also incorporating social or socio-cultural dimensions involved in the listening comprehension process.

A model of second language listening comprehension

Flowerdew and Miller (2005) present a cognitive model of the L2 listening process and recommend that language educators use it as a pedagogical tool while designing listening activities in a learner-centered setting. Figure 1 represents Flowerdew and Miller's model:

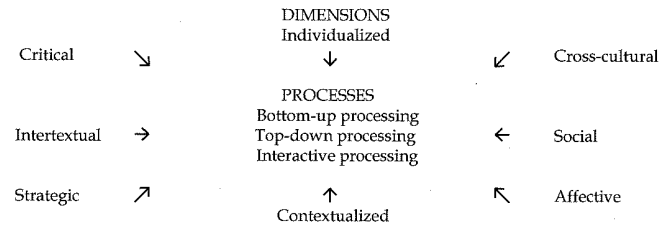

Figure 1: A model of second language listening comprehension (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p.86)

In addition to the core processes which are at the heart of this model, it includes eight dimensions that "may affect the way messages are perceived and processed" (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p. 28). The authors argue that these additional factors define more accurately the complex processes of L2 listening comprehension. These dimensions are briefly outlined below.

The individualized dimension opens up the possibility of accounting for individual variation in text processing and offers L2 teachers the possibility to be more sensitive to learner's needs. For example, teachers must recognize that L2 novice listeners (or readers) need first of all to develop bottom-up skills whereas intermediate or advanced learners may concentrate their efforts on developing top-down skills, while at the same time continuing to improve their bottom-up skills.

The cross-cultural dimension provides instructors with the opportunity to account for differences in cultural interpretations of texts. These differences are due to the L2 learners' schemata and background knowledge acquired in their L1 community. Flowerdew and Miller point out that cultural and age/sex/social group differences may cause dissimilar expectations and interpretations of a given text, specifically in L2 situations.

The social dimension views the listening comprehension process as a social activity. Flowerdew and Miller state that the bottom-up text processing model presents listening mainly as a psychoperceptual process and fails to take into account interactive dialogues (or conversations) that routinely occur between interlocutors in the real world. They see conversations as "a very social activity, in which both speaker and hearer affect the nature of the message" (p.89). They note, however, that "although conversations

are a special case "for the social dimension of listening, that dimension is in fact present, to a greater or lesser degree, in all types of listening, even in monologue" (p.89).

In relation to *the contextualized dimension,* Flowerdew and Miller claim that in real-life situations, the listening process is always accompanied by various activities that facilitate comprehension. For example, educational settings often require students to listen to a lecturer, to look at visual aids etc., or before a class, they may be assigned to read some materials related to the topic at hand. In this regard, instructionally it is important for teachers to emphasize the contextualized dimension for L2 settings in order to avoid situations in which decontextualized listening will most certainly impede comprehension because it represents "unnatural listening".

The affective dimension encompasses variables influencing the process of language learning in general, and listening comprehension in particular. Following Mathhewson's (1985) affective model for reading, Flowerdew and Miller consider four variables: attitude, motivation, affect, and physical feeling. The attitude variable consists of learners' positive attitude toward listening and to the source of the listening material; the motivation variable involves learners' curiosity, competence, achievement, esteem, desires to know and to understand, as well as aesthetic appreciation; the affect variable is unstable in terms of duration and relates to feelings (e.g. moods, sentiment, emotion etc.) that influence someone's decision to listen or not to listen to a text; physical feeling comprises two components: unfavorable conditions (e.g. background noises) that might affect feelings and the text itself which might provoke positive or negative physical feelings (e.g. the feeling of pleasure/sadness from an enjoyable/tragic story). Two supplementary variables that account only for L2 listening situations are also included in the model: the physical presence of speaker and the learning goal in listening which in turn includes two elements, i.e. learners' willingness to understand verbal messages and above all learners' willingness to develop listening abilities in order to achieve a higher level of language proficiency.

The strategic dimension includes language awareness and learning strategies. Flowerdew and Miller propose that teachers explicitly teach strategies that will support the development of listening abilities.

The intertextual dimension is grounded in Bakhtin's (cited in Flowerdew & Miller, 2005) concept of intertextuality. This dimension is primarily focused on linguistic relations existing among texts in terms of the notions of register and genre into L2 listening comprehension. Different registers and genres have their own continuously repeated patterns of language use or intertextuality. Flowerdew and Miller admit that "in this respect the notion of intertextuality is similar to that of schemata, although the latter [schemata] are concerned with more than just language" (p. 94) but patterns of language used by social groups for specific purposes.

The critical dimension characterizes texts as social artifacts created by members of a particular society whose relations are affected by inequalities in power. Therefore, text comprehension, in particular listening comprehension, becomes a political activity because all texts are colored with ideologies of individuals who produced those texts. Such an approach to text comprehension requires the ability to analyze a text in context and to decode the ideologies embedded in it. Flowerdew and Miller admit that the critical dimension can be implemented only at an advanced level. In their view, this dimension decreases the degree of trivialization which often accompanies L2 language learning and prepares students to be active, engaged and responsible members of society.

Flowerdew and Miller point out that the three core processes of their listening comprehension model should unquestionably be taken into consideration by L2 instructors and listening test developers, but the application of the eight dimensions are optional and may vary depending on the goal of each particular listening activity. Our discussion now turns to approaches to listening comprehension instruction and assessment practices developed by the field of L2 pedagogy over the last fifty years.

Approaches to teaching and assessing L2 listening comprehension

Three major approaches that have influenced language pedagogy over the last five decades are: the discrete-point approach, the integrative approach, and the communicative approach (Buck: 2003). In retrospect, it is not surprising that these three approaches continue to exert influence on the teaching of listening comprehension.

The discrete-point approach

The discrete-point approach appeared in the 1950s when the field of language pedagogy was dominated by the audio-lingual method. The discrete-point approach emphasized the identification of isolated linguistic elements. The most common types of listening tasks developed within the discrete-point approach are *phonemic discrimination, paraphrase recognition* and *response evaluation.*

Phonemic discrimination tasks are phonemic discrimination exercises that usually include a task whereby students listen to a series of isolated words or sentences and then indicate what sounds or words they have just heard. Usually, phonemic discrimination tasks focus on minimal pairs and students are expected to identify the sounds and/or words they hear. For example,

Example 1:
Cochez la phrase entendue. Ecoutez:
Circle the sentence that you hear. Listen:
1. Elle est pure. / Elle est pour.
2. *Tu es sûr. / Tu es sourd.*
(from *Phonétique, 350 exercices,* Abry and Chalaron, 1994, p. 31)

Example 2:
Choose the words with the [p] sound in them:

Pen	Ben
Ball	Paul
Bat	Pat

(Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p.199)

Today phonemic discrimination tasks are considered to be "unnatural" since students are typically expected to listen to longer texts, not isolated sentences. However, despite their unpopularity, this type of task is still valuable if some sounds of the new language are absent from the learners' first language (e.g. English does not differentiate between the sounds [u] and [y] or Japanese does not distinguish between /l/ and /r/).

Paraphrase recognition tasks require listeners to reformulate what they hear. For example, listeners are expected to select the reformulated sentence that is the closest to the sentence they heard.

Example 3:
Learners hear:
Mary asked her mother for some money to go to the cinema.
Learners read and choose the form:
a. Mary wanted money to buy some new clothes.
b. Mary wanted to see a movie so she asked for some money.
c. Mary asked her mother to go with her to the cinema.
(Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p.199)

In response evaluation tasks, listeners typically hear a question and are expected to select the most appropriate answer

Example 4:
Learners hear:
- *How much time did you spend in Boston?*

Learners read:
(a) *Yes, I did.* (c) *Yes, I had to*
(b) *Almost $ 250* (d) *About four days*

(Buck, 2003, p. 65)

This *response evaluation* listening task presupposes that students can provide a correct answer only if they know the expression how much time and are able to pick it out from the string of words they heard.

While the essential ideas of the discrete-point approach are to assess one small part of a decontextualized utterance, examples 2 and 3 demonstrate that such listening tasks actually assess a number of discrete-points. Contemporary views on listening instruction argue that the decontextualized utterances widely used in discrete-point tasks ignore the redundancy of spoken language and the context of communication which provides listeners with helpful information for making inferences about what they hear (Buck, 2003).

The integrative approach

In the early 1970s, there was a shift to an integrative approach which builds on the assumption that more than one element of listening should be assessed at a time. Oller (1979), defines integrative tasks as "any procedure or task that causes the learner to process sequences of elements in a language that conform to the normal contextual constraints of that language" (Oller, 1979, p. 38, as cited in Buck, 2003, p. 67). Thus, the integrative tasks highlight language processing whereas discrete-point tasks assess individual elements of language. The types of tasks used in the integrative approach to listening instruction are *dictation, sentence repetition activities, fill-in-the-gap, statement evaluation* and *translation* (Buck, 2003).

Dictation tasks are the most representative technique associated with the integrative approach. Within this approach, dictation is viewed as language processing that assess learners' performance at the phonological, syntactic and semantic levels and in this sense they are integrative (Oller, 1979). The task procedures usually require learners to listen to a text twice and to write down segments of the text they hear. The most obvious problem with dictation tasks is that they do not measure the ability to comprehend the text, but instead test listening on two relatively narrow levels: if the listeners are presented with short segments of a text, then listening is reduced to the word recognition level; if the listeners are exposed to long segments, then, in this case, comprehension of the linguistic level is assessed (Buck, 2003).

Sentence repetition tasks are a variation of dictation, but in this case listeners are required to retell segments of the text instead of writing it down. Typically during the task procedures, listeners repeat a decontextualized sentence that they hear only once. Their responses are tape-recorded in order to be scored later. The sentence repetition task is useful with illiterate learners or learners whose writing skills are not yet fully developed (e.g. children). However neither dictation nor sentence repetition tasks assess listeners ability to understand the meaning of a text (Buck, 2003).

Fill-in-the-gap tasks were primarily developed for teaching reading comprehension, however, they have been widely used in listening comprehension instruction. In fill-in-the-gap tasks, learners are given transcripts of aural texts containing blanks, listen to a recording of the printed text, and are expected to fill in the blanks.[2]

Example 5:
Learners listen to the song and fill in the blanks:
Don't know_____I've been so blue
Don't know_____'s come over you
You have found someone new
And don't it make my brown eyes blue (etc.)
(Buck, 2003, p.88)

Example 6:
Learners hear:
Conforama (a French radio-advertisement for furniture store chain in France)
- *Deux, un… il est lancé le nouveau record Conforama !!!*
- *Un ensemble composé d'une grande bibliothèque, plus un bureau, plus une chaise dactylo : 795 francs seulement ! Bibliothèque et bureau colories frêne vert ou pin !*
- *795 francs, les trois pièces disponibles immédiatement ! Seule Confo peut vous l'offrir !*

2 This example is taken from a real-life listening test designed by the author of this document.

- Mais ce record, c'est jusqu'au 24 août !
- Venez chez Conforama : le pays ou la vie est moins chère !

Learners read:
Complétez les phrases suivantes (complete the following sentences) :
- Deux, un… il est lancé le _____ _____ Conforama.
- Un ensemble composé d'une _____ _____, plus un _____,
plus une _____ dactylo : 795 francs seulement.
- Mais ce record, c'est jusqu'au _____ _____ seulement !

It should be noted that fill-in-the gap tasks have an obvious weakness when used to teach listening comprehension (Henning, Gary& Gary, 1983; Weir, 1993; Buck, 2003). That is, learners tend to listen only for missing parts and/or complete the blanks in the text without fully understanding the text. The main criticism of fill-in-the-gap tasks and listening recall tasks is that they only provide evidence of what learners processed (heard) but not what they understood.

Statement evaluation tasks require learners to evaluate the truth of a statement (example 5) or to compare two sentences and to determine whether they have the same meaning (example 6). For example, learners hear:

Example 7:
Learners hear:
The Moon is the only Earth's natural satellite.
Learners are invited to circle an answer:
1. True
2. False

Example 8:
Learners hear:
(a) New-Orleans was devastated by hurricane Katrina.
(b) When the hurricane came ashore, the city was devastated.

Despite the disadvantages of statement evaluation tasks (e.g. again listeners are exposed to decontextualized sentences), the task procedures can guarantee to some extent that learners have to process the sentences at the semantic level otherwise it would be impossible for them to evaluate the statements they hear.

Translation tasks are not generally considered to be integrative tasks but are instead quite similar to dictation tasks. Learners listen to a recorded text that has been divided into short segments beforehand and then write down in their native language what they heard in the target language. While Buck (1992) sees translation as a reliable source of whether learners understand what they hear or not, he highlights two major drawbacks: the teacher cannot be monolingual, and teachers and learners must share the same native language.

While the integrative approach developed some listening tasks with which listening could be processed in real time, these tasks allow listeners to attend only to the semantic meaning of the text and do not encourage learners "to relate linguistic information to a wider context or to ask the test-taker to process inferential meanings" (Buck, 2003, p. 82). At present, listening is no longer considered to be listening if used for the sole purpose of improving pronunciation, studying grammar or vocabulary because "by definition, reading [listening] involves comprehension. When readers [listeners] are not comprehending, they are not reading [listening]" (Chastain, 1988, p. 217).

The communicative approach

With the raise of the communicative approach, which sees language proficiency as the development of communicative competence, language instruction should highlight the importance of authentic communication by presenting and using the spoken and written forms of the language in meaningful contexts. Weir (1990) outlines the characteristics of the communicative approach as follows: the focus should be on communicative performance and not on linguistic accuracy; tasks should account for conditions of actual performance as closely as possible; the use of authentic language is important; the authenticity of tasks and the genuineness of texts are necessary; it is important to identify skills and performance conditions of language use in particular contexts; a variety of tasks should be designed with respect to communicative purposes; tasks should reproduce communicative teaching activities but exclude peer or teacher assistance during the task procedures.

The key features of the communicative approach to assessing listening comprehension are *authenticity* and *purposefulness* (e.g. purposeful listening). The authenticity feature is manifest in the use of texts taken from authentic sources (e.g. radio stations, TV channels of the L2 speech community). The purposefulness feature occurs when the task simulates/approximates real-world situations. For example,

Example 9:
You and some friends want to go out for dinner together. Listen to restaurant reviews and make some notes about each restaurant. Then discuss with your friends which restaurant you think you would all like to go to. Listen for information like price, location and quality of food and service.
(Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p. 13)

This example clearly demonstrates that communicative tasks require that teachers find authentic text (or texts) yet, it also presents at least two major challenges. First, it assumes that there are many ways to interpret a text, many more than can predicted. In this regard, it may be difficult to determine which interpretation of a text is correct (Buck, 2003). Second, the existence of many communicative situations and/or contexts challenges the generalizability of communicative listening tasks. That is, the ability of listeners to perform in one particular test situation does not guarantee that they will be able to demonstrate the same ability in other situations (Buck, 2003; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

Despite the current predominance of the communicative approach in foreign language teaching/learning, at present there is considerable overlap between the listening tasks developed by all three pedagogical frameworks, e.g. discrete-point (e.g. paraphrase recognition) or integrative (e.g. fill-in-the-gap) tasks are still wide-

ly used in language classrooms. Listening instruction and assessment today take a variety of approaches that can be used interchangeably or in combination in order to better develop and assess learners' abilities to comprehending spoken discourse.

Conclusion

Currently, language pedagogy views listening comprehension as an interactive process entailing the learners' knowledge of the linguistic code (bottom-up) and the learners' knowledge of the world (top-down) based on schema structures that aid comprehension. Recent research acknowledges that listening comprehension processes involve not only bottom-up and top-down processes but also social or socio-cultural dimensions (e.g. Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

While the discrete point approach sees listening comprehension as the ability to recognize individual features of the language, the integrative approach seeks to understand listening as the ability to process language effectively. Today the communicative approach regards listening comprehension as a process of making inferences. Each of these approaches has contributed in its own way to framing the theoretical and practical bases of listening instruction.

The listening tasks discussed above are prominent in today's language classroom. They can be used in a variety of ways depending on learners' academic needs and goals and on learners' level of proficiency. For example, the listening task presented in Example 5 might best be used with beginning level learners whereas the tasks from Examples 8 and 9 may be most appropriate for intermediate learners. In order to develop L2 listening ability, the use of various listening tasks should be geared to learners' level of proficiency, as well as to the particular instructional goals, including their listening goals. For example, instructional goals related to listening comprehension are processing of discrete-point information (see Example 1), processing of spoken discourse for functional purposes (e.g. to listen and to interact with other learners in order to complete a real-life listening task, see Example 9). Thus, listening tasks enable teachers to develop specific (e.g. to discriminate between L2 sounds) or general (e.g. to listen for a specific information) listening skills. It is important to highlight here that the use of listening tasks in language instruction requires us, teachers, to make appropriate pedagogical choices in order to foster learners' listening abilities and, consequently, their language development.

For more information on the teaching of listening comprehension, the following collection of scholarly publications is recommended:

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An annotated listening comprehension bibliography can be found at: http://www.abax.co.jp/listen/bibliography.html

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