

Listening: Problems and Solutions

Fan Yagang

In teaching listening comprehension we must be careful not to go to extremes, either by being concerned too exclusively with theories without thinking about their application to teaching, or by obstinately following frozen routines—opening the textbook and explaining new words, playing the tape recorder, and asking/answering questions. It is essential for a teacher to have an overall understanding of what listening is, why it is difficult for foreign-language learners, and what some solutions may be. The vital question is how to bridge the gap between an analysis of listening and actual classroom teaching.

What is listening?

Listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary, and grasping his meaning (Howatt and Dakin 1974). An able listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously. Willis (1981:134) lists a series of micro-skills of listening, which she calls enabling skills. They are:

- predicting what people are going to talk about
- guessing at unknown words or phrases without panicking
- using one's own knowledge of the subject to help one understand
- identifying relevant points; rejecting irrelevant information
- retaining relevant points (note-taking, summarizing)
- recognizing discourse markers, e.g., Well; Oh, another thing is; Now, finally; etc.
- recognizing cohesive devices, e.g., such as and which, including link words, pronouns, references, etc.
- understanding different intonation patterns and uses of stress, etc., which give clues to meaning and social setting
- understanding inferred information, e.g., speakers' attitude or intentions

What are some listening problems?

The evidence that shows why listening is difficult comes mainly from four sources: the message to be listened to, the speaker, the listener, and the physical setting.

The Message

Content. Many learners find it more difficult to listen to a taped message than to read the same message on a piece of paper, since the listening passage comes into the ear

in the twinkling of an eye, whereas reading material can be read as long as the reader likes.

The listening material may deal with almost any area of life. It might include street gossip, proverbs, new products, and situations unfamiliar to the student. Also, in a spontaneous conversation speakers frequently change topics.

The content is usually not well organized.

In many cases listeners cannot predict what speakers are going to say, whether it is a news report on the radio, an interviewer's questions, an everyday conversation, etc.

Messages on the radio or recorded on tape cannot be listened to at a slower speed. Even in conversation it is impossible to ask the speaker to repeat something as many times as the interlocutor might like.

Linguistic Features. Liaison (the linking of words in speech when the second word begins with a vowel, e.g., an orange /@nOrIndZ/) and elision (leaving out a sound or sounds, e.g., suppose may be pronounced /sp@uz/ in rapid speech) are common phenomena that make it difficult for students to distinguish or recognize individual words in the stream of speech. They are used to seeing words written as discrete entities in their textbooks.

If listening materials are made up of everyday conversation, they may contain a lot of colloquial words and expressions, such as stuff for material, guy for man, etc., as well as slang. Students who have been exposed mainly to formal or bookish English may not be familiar with these expressions.

In spontaneous conversations people sometimes use ungrammatical sentences because of nervousness or hesitation. They may omit elements of sentences or add something redundant. This may make it difficult for the listener to understand the meaning.

The Speaker

Ur (1984:7) points out that "in ordinary conversation or even in much extempore speech-making or lecturing we actually say a good deal more than would appear to be necessary in order to convey our message. Redundant utterances may take the form of repetitions, false starts, re-phrasings, self-corrections, elaborations, tautologies, and apparently meaningless additions such as I mean or you know." This redundancy is a natural feature of speech and may be either a help or a hindrance, depending on the students' level. It may make it more difficult for beginners to understand what the

speaker is saying; on the other hand, it may give advanced students more time to “tune in” to the speaker’s voice and speech style.

Learners tend to be used to their teacher’s accent or to the standard variety of British or American English. They find it hard to understand speakers with other accents.

Spoken prose, as in news broadcasting and reading aloud written texts, is characterized by an even pace, volume, pitch, and intonation. Natural dialogues, on the other hand, are full of hesitations, pauses, and uneven intonation. Students used to the former kinds of listening material may sometimes find the latter difficult to understand.

The Listener

Foreign-language students are not familiar enough with clichés and collocations in English to predict a missing word or phrase. They cannot, for example, be expected to know that rosy often collocates with cheeks nor to predict the last word will be something like rage when they hear the phrase he was in a towering. . . . This is a major problem for students.

Lack of sociocultural, factual, and contextual knowledge of the target language can present an obstacle to comprehension because language is used to express its culture (Anderson and Lynch 1988).

Foreign-language learners usually devote more time to reading than to listening, and so lack exposure to different kinds of listening materials. Even our college students majoring in English have no more than four hours’ regular training per week.

Both psychological and physical factors may have a negative effect on perception and interpretation of listening material. It is tiring for students to concentrate on interpreting unfamiliar sounds, words, and sentences for long periods.

Physical Setting

Noise, including both background noises on the recording and environmental noises, can take the listener’s mind off the content of the listening passage.

Listening material on tape or radio lacks visual and aural environmental clues. Not seeing the speaker’s body language and facial expressions makes it more difficult for the listener to understand the speaker’s meaning.

Unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality equipment can interfere with the listener's comprehension.

Some solutions

What can teachers do to help students master the difficulties?

Not all the problems described above can be overcome. Certain features of the message and the speaker, for instance, are inevitable. But this does not mean that the teacher can do nothing about them. S/he can at least provide the students with suitable listening materials, background and linguistic knowledge, enabling skills, pleasant classroom conditions, and useful exercises to help them discover effective listening strategies. Here are a few helpful ideas:

The Message

1. Grade listening materials according to the students' level, and provide authentic materials rather than idealized, filtered samples. It is true that natural speech is hard to grade and it is difficult for students to identify the different voices and cope with frequent overlaps. Nevertheless, the materials should progress step by step from semi-authenticity that displays most of the linguistic features of natural speech to total authenticity, because the final aim is to understand natural speech in real life.

2. Design task-oriented exercises to engage the students' interest and help them learn listening skills subconsciously. As Ur (1984:25) has said, "Listening exercises are most effective if they are constructed round a task. That is to say, the students are required to do something in response to what they hear that will demonstrate their understanding." She has suggested some such tasks: expressing agreement or disagreement, taking notes, marking a picture or diagram according to instructions, and answering questions. Compared with traditional multiple-choice questions, task-based exercises have an obvious advantage: they not only test the students' listening comprehension but also encourage them to use different kinds of listening skills and strategies to reach their destination in an active way.

3. Provide students with different kinds of input, such as lectures, radio news, films, TV plays, announcements, everyday conversation, interviews, storytelling, English songs, and so on.

Brown and Yule (1983) categorize spoken texts into three broad types: static, dynamic, and abstract. Texts that describe objects or give instructions are static texts; those that tell a story or recount an incident are dynamic texts; those that focus on someone's ideas and beliefs rather than on concrete objects are abstract texts. Brown

and Yule suggest that the three types of input should be provided according to the difficulties they present and the students' level. They draw a figure, in which difficulty increases from left to right, and, within any one type of input, complexity increases from top to bottom.

4. Try to find visual aids or draw pictures and diagrams associated with the listening topics to help students guess or imagine actively.

The Speaker

1. Give practice in liaisons and elisions in order to help students get used to the acoustic forms of rapid natural speech. It is useful to find rapidly uttered colloquial collocations and ask students to imitate native speakers' pronunciation.

2. Make students aware of different native-speaker accents. Of course, strong regional accents are not suitable for training in listening, but in spontaneous conversation native speakers do have certain accents. Moreover, the American accent is quite different from the British and Australian. Therefore, it is necessary to let students deal with different accents, especially in extensive listening.

3. Select short, simple listening texts with little redundancy for lower-level students and complicated authentic materials with more redundancy for advanced learners. It has been reported that elementary-level students are not capable of interpreting extra information in the redundant messages, whereas advanced listeners may benefit from messages being expanded, paraphrased, etc. (Chaudron 1983).

The Listener

1. Provide background knowledge and linguistic knowledge, such as complex sentence structures and colloquial words and expressions, as needed.

2. Give, and try to get, as much feedback as possible. Throughout the course the teacher should bridge the gap between input and students' response and between the teacher's feedback and students' reaction in order to keep activities purposeful. It is important for the listening-class teacher to give students immediate feedback on their performance. This not only promotes error correction but also provides encouragement. It can help students develop confidence in their ability to deal with listening problems. Student feedback can help the teacher judge where the class is going and how it should be guided.

3. Help students develop the skills of listening with anticipation, listening for specific information, listening for gist, interpretation and inference, listening for intended

meaning, listening for attitude, etc., by providing varied tasks and exercises at different levels with different focuses.

A typology of activities for a listening lesson

I suggest a variety of exercises, tasks, and activities appropriate to different stages of a listening lesson (pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening). Good classroom activities can themselves be effective solutions to listening problems.

The list covers a wide range of listening activities from simple to more sophisticated. Some teachers, accustomed to following exactly the exercises and tasks provided in the textbook without thinking about whether they are suitable for their students or not, might look on these activities as extra work and a burden. I would like to point out that it is a pleasure and a positive experience to try various exercises, tasks, and classroom activities, for successful lessons depend on the teacher's knowing and using a variety of teaching methods. Teachers should have at their fingertips a set of exercises, tasks, and activities that they can use with their classes whenever they may be needed.

Conclusion

Some teachers think that listening is the easiest skill to teach, whereas most students think it is the most difficult to improve. This contradiction tells us that there are some things about teaching listening that need to be explored. Perhaps those who say it is "the easiest to teach" mean that it does not require much painstaking lesson preparation and all they need to do is play the tapes and test the students' comprehension. But is there nothing more to teaching listening than testing? We must find out all we can about how listening can be improved and what activities are useful to this end and then use this knowledge and these activities in our own classrooms.

REFERENCES

Anderson, A. and T. Lynch. 1988. *Listening*. London: Oxford University Press.

Brown, G. and G. Yule. 1983. *Teaching the spoken language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chaudron, C. 1983. Foreign talk in the classroom-An aid to learning? In *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition*, ed. H. Seliger and M. H. Long. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Howatt, A. and J. Dakin. 1974. Language laboratory materials, ed. J. P. B. Allen, S. P. B. Allen, and S. P. Corder.

Ur, P. 1984. Teaching of English as a second or foreign language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Willis, J. 1981. Teaching English through English. London: Longman.