

14 Listening comprehension: approach, design, and procedure

Not to let a word get in the way of its sentence
Nor to let a sentence get in the way of its intention,
But to send your mind out to meet the intention as a guest;
That is understanding.

Chinese proverb, fourth century B.C.

In this chapter, we examine three dimensions involved in the teaching of listening comprehension. These are referred to as *approach*, *design*, and *procedure* (see Chapter 2). First we present an outline of some of what is known about the processes involved in listening. This is the level of approach, where assumptions about how listeners proceed in decoding utterances to extract meanings are spelled out. The next level is design, where an operationalization is made of the component micro-skills that constitute our competence as listeners. This in turn enables teaching objectives to be defined. At the third level, that of procedure, questions concerning exercise types and teaching techniques are examined. These three levels illustrate the domain of *methodology* in language teaching.

Approach

Message factors

Current understanding of the nature of listening comprehension draws on research in psycholinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive science (e.g., Clark and Clark 1977, Leech 1977, Schank and Abelson 1977, Marslen-Wilson and Tyler 1980, Clark and Carlson 1982, Dore and McDermott 1982). There is little direct research on second-language listening comprehension, however, and what follows is an interpretation of relevant native-language research. Three related levels of discourse processing appear to be involved in listening: propositional identification, interpretation of illocutionary force, and activation of real-world knowledge. The central question from both a theoretical and a pedagogical perspective concerns the nature of the units listeners make use of in understanding language. Do we listen for in-

tonation, stress, words, grammar, sentence, or some other type of language unit?

Much of the linguistic and psycholinguistic literature on comprehension suggests that propositions are the basic units of meaning involved in comprehension and that the listener's ultimate goal is to determine the propositions that an utterance or speech event expresses (Clark and Clark 1977, Foss and Haikes 1978). But propositions are represented indirectly in the surface structure of utterances. Listeners make use of two kinds of knowledge to identify propositions: knowledge of the syntax of the target language and real world knowledge. Syntactic knowledge enables the listener to *chunk* incoming discourse into segments or constituents. The following sentence would have to be chunked as in (1) rather than (2) in order to identify its propositional meaning:

I am informed that your appointment has been terminated.

1. I am informed that your appointment/has been terminated.
2. I am informed that your/appointment has/been terminated.

The ability to correctly identify chunks or constituents is a by-product of grammatical competence. Knowledge of the structure of noun phrases, verb phrases, and the grammatical devices used to express such relationships as complementation, relativization, and coordination in English allows us to segment discourse into the appropriate chunks as part of the process of propositional identification. Where segmentation is difficult, comprehension is also difficult.

But knowledge of the world is also used to help identify propositions, enabling listeners to sometimes bypass the constituent identification process. Hence, (1) below is understood as (2) because, in real life, this is a plausible reconstruction of likely events involving cats and rats:

1. and rat cat it chased the ate the
2. The cat chased the rat and ate it.

The following processes therefore appear to be involved in comprehension:

1. The listener takes in raw speech and holds an image of it in short-term memory.
2. An attempt is made to organize what was heard in constituents, identifying their content and function.
3. As constituents are identified, they are used to construct propositions, grouping the propositions together to form a coherent message.
4. Once the listener has identified and reconstructed the propositional meanings, these are held in long-term memory, and the form in which the message was originally received is deleted.

(Clark and Clark 1977: 49)

Permanent, or long-term, memory works with meaning, not with form. The propositional meaning of sentences is retained, not the actual words or grammatical devices that were used to express it. Thus, after hearing *Tom said that the car had been fixed and could be picked up at 5:00*, a listener is likely to remember only that the car is now ready to be picked up and not whether the speaker said *the car is fixed* rather than *the car has been fixed*, or *could be picked up* rather than *will be ready to be picked up*. Memory works with propositions, not with sentences.

What we have just illustrated is a semantically based view of how a listener decides what a sentence means. Leech distinguishes this view of meaning from a pragmatic perspective, that is, one that focuses on what an utterance means to a person in a particular speech situation. "The semantic structure of a sentence specifies what that sentence means as a structure in a given language, in abstraction from speaker and addressee; whereas pragmatics deals with that meaning as it is interpreted interactionally in a given situation" (Leech 1977: 1). Theories that describe how pragmatic meanings are understood derive from speech-act theory, conversational analysis, and discourse analysis (see Chapter 8).

Speech-act theory is concerned with the relationship between the form of utterances and their function in social interaction and rests on the distinction between propositional meaning and the illocutionary force of utterances. For example, the sentence *Helen likes chocolates* as a proposition attributes a certain quality to Helen, but does not tell us whether the sentence was uttered in order to offer an *explanation* of her obesity, a *suggestion* as to what to do with the chocolates, or a *denial* of a previous assertion. Speech-act and other interactional approaches to meaning assume that when we use language for communication, the meanings that are communicated are a function of the interactions between speakers and hearers meeting in specific circumstances for the achievement of particular goals. In arriving at an interpretation of the illocutionary force of an utterance (that is, in determining the speaker's intention), listeners call upon their knowledge of the situation, the participants, their purposes, goals, rights and duties, as well as the position of the utterance within the sequence of utterances preceding it. In an illuminating analysis of how the interpretation of talk is organized by context, Dore and McDermott observe that "in the course of organizing sensible moments with each other, people use talk as a social tool, relying on the social work they are doing together to specify the meaning of utterances" (1982: 375).

Grice proposed that one source of knowledge listeners make use of is their understanding of the nature and goals of conversation. He stated this knowledge in the form of maxims of conversational behavior, each

illustrating the "cooperative principle" that dictates the sort of contributions people make during conversational interaction:

1. Maxim of quantity: Make your contribution just as informative as required.
2. Maxim of quality: Make your contribution one that is true.
3. Maxim of relation: Be relevant.
4. Maxim of manner: Avoid obscurity, ambiguity, prolixity. Be orderly.

(quoted in Clark and Clark 1977: 122)

Conversationalists, therefore, normally act on the assumption that remarks made during conversation will be relevant to the ongoing concerns of speaker and hearer. Thus, if I invite you to dinner, I assume that you will respond with a remark that is relevant to my purposes. I will try to interpret what you say as an acceptance or a refusal. But if you respond with *There's a white Cadillac on the corner of the street*, I will have great difficulty assigning this utterance to the category of reply I anticipated.

International views of meaning stress the crucial role inferencing and interpretation play in listening comprehension and remind us of the active and creative dimensions of listening. Work in cognitive science reveals an added dimension of this inferential process.

Script and schema theory (Schank and Abelson 1977) describes the role of prior knowledge in comprehension. For example, in understanding *I went to the dentist this morning. He gave me an injection and I didn't feel a thing*, the following prior knowledge is referred to:

1. We normally go to see a dentist when we need a check-up or when we have something wrong with our teeth.
2. Dentists typically check, drill, repair, or remove teeth.
3. This process is painful.
4. An injection can be given to relieve the pain.

This body of knowledge about a specific situation (at the dentist's), particular participants (the dentist, the assistant, the patient), goals of the situation (remedying a problem with the patient's teeth), and procedures (drilling a tooth, giving an injection) can be referred to as the *dentist's script*. Script or schema knowledge is what we know about particular situations and the goals, participants, and procedures commonly associated with them. Much of our knowledge of the world is organized around *scripts*, that is, memory for typical episodes that occur in specific situations. Our knowledge of dentist's scripts, cinema scripts, library scripts, drugstore scripts, school scripts, meal scripts, and so on, makes it possible to interpret a great deal of the language of everyday life. The information needed to understand many utterances is therefore not explicitly present in the utterance but is provided by the listeners from their repertoire of scripts. This means that many of the connections between events need not be specified when we talk about them, since they are already known and can be inferred. But if we lack a relevant

script, comprehension may be difficult. For example, we have no available script that can be used to understand this sequence of events: *I climbed onto an elephant. The piano was out of tune. The rabbit tasted delicious.*

We are able to understand many utterances from our general awareness of how people achieve goals and from our assumptions that most human behavior is purposeful and directed toward particular ends. Non-native speakers, however, may lack many culturally specific scripts; their individual scripts may differ in degree and content from target-language scripts, and this poses additional problems for the non-native listener.

We are now able to expand the tentative model of the processes involved in comprehension:

1. The type of interactional act or speech event in which the listener is involved is determined (e.g., conversation, lecture, discussion, debate).
2. Scripts relevant to the particular situations are recalled.
3. The goals of the speaker are inferred through reference to the situation, the script, and the sequential position of the utterance.
4. The propositional meaning of the utterance is determined.
5. An illocutionary meaning is assigned to the message.
6. This information is retained and acted upon, and the form in which it was originally received is deleted.

Medium factors

The preceding discussion has focused on how meanings are understood in listening. But listeners confront another dimension of comprehension when processing speech. The act of speaking imposes a particular form on utterances, and this considerably affects how messages are understood. We call factors that result from this *medium factors*. Medium factors vary according to the nature of the discourse (whether planned or unplanned), the speaker's attitude toward the message or the listeners, and the situation in which the act of communication takes place (e.g., classroom, lecture room, or informal setting). We will consider nine such factors here, each of which influences the work listeners must do to process speech.

CLAUSAL BASIS OF SPEECH

Whereas the unit of organization of written discourse is the sentence, spoken language is generally delivered one clause at a time (Pawley, personal communication). The unit of conversational discourse is not the full sentence but the clause, and longer utterances in conversation generally consist of several clauses coordinated. Most of the clauses used are simple conjuncts or adjuncts, and Pawley points out that cases of complex clauses in conversation are rare. Clauses appear to be a major constituent in both the planning and delivery of speech. The frequent

The context of language teaching

use of coordinating conjunctions is illustrated in this example from Stanley:

Um perhaps the most celebrated near miss was a twin reactor two reactors side by side in Tennessee in 1975, *and* that was due to a worker at the plant using a candle to test which way the air was flowing, underneath the control room, *and* it caught fire. *And* they had a very serious fire there for fourteen hours. They didn't know how to put it out ... *And* it was only shut down in the end *and* a very you know, a major accident averted by an operator using a very unusual *and* quite clever way of shutting it down by hand. (1980: 78)

REDUCED FORMS

In articulating clauses, speakers are guided by the need to express meanings efficiently. This means that words that play a less crucial role in the message may be slurred or dropped, and other words given more prominence (Brown 1977). In addition, consonants and vowels within words are affected by the position in which they occur. In speech there is not always time for the tongue to assume the ideal position required to articulate a sound. Consequently, patterns of assimilation are common, leading to the disappearance of word boundaries, to the omission of certain vowels and consonants, and to substitutions occurring for elements within words. Sentences also occur frequently in elliptical forms, with the deletion of such elements as subjects, auxiliaries, verbs, articles, and pronouns when context makes their presence redundant, as in *When will you be back? Tomorrow maybe* (instead of *Maybe I'll be back tomorrow*).

UNGRAMMATICAL FORMS

Because of the effort speakers put into planning and organizing the content of their utterances in ongoing time, grammaticality is often less relevant than ideational coherence. Consequently, ungrammatical forms and constructions are frequent. For example:

Big companies can only really make lots of money out of high technology centralized systems ... *And* because of that *it* is tending to go into high technology solutions.

(lack of agreement)

And after that we arrived in a little town that there was no hotel anywhere ... (faulty clause construction)

PAUSING AND SPEECH ERRORS

An important component of human speech consists of the pauses, hesitations, false starts, and corrections that make up such a large portion

of what we actually say. In natural speech, between 30 percent and 50 percent of speaking time may consist of pauses and hesitations, indicating some of the selection and planning processes speakers use. Pauses may be either silent pauses or filled pauses. Filled pauses contain items *uh, oh, hmm, ah, well, say, sort of, just, kind of, I mean, I think, I guess*, which indicate that the speaker is reaching for a word, or has found the word or an approximation of it.

RATE OF DELIVERY

Pausing also affects our perception of the pace of speech. The impression of faster or slower speech generally results from the amount of intra-clausal pausing that speakers use. If such pauses are eliminated, the impression of rapid speech is created. Fast and slow speakers are hence distinguished by the amount of pausing they use. Rivers cites the following figures:

Fast: above 220 wpm
Moderately fast: 190~220 wpm
Average: 160~220 wpm
Moderately slow: 130~ 160 wpm
Slow: below 130 wpm

(1981: 173)

RHYTHM AND STRESS

The rhythmic pattern of spoken English is another of its distinctive features. In many languages, the length of time required to pronounce an utterance depends upon the number of syllables it contains, since syllables are of about equal length. English, however, is a stress-timed language. Within an utterance, only particular syllables are stressed, and the remaining syllables in the utterance, no matter how many there are, must accommodate to the rhythm established by the stressed syllables, which recur at more or less regular intervals. According to Woods (1979), there is a major stressed syllable on the average of every 0.6 seconds in English. This means that the following sentences would take about the same amount of time to articulate, even though the number of syllables contained in each sentence is very different:

The CAT is INTerested in proTECTing its KITTens.
LARGE CARS WASTE GAS.

This adds yet another dimension to the listener's task, since listeners must be able to identify words according to the rhythmic structure within which they occur. They must be able to interpret words in stressed, mildly stressed, and unstressed forms, and not merely in their ideal forms as listed in a dictionary.

The context of language teaching

COHESIVE DEVICES

Speech shares with written discourse the mechanisms for marking grammatical ties within and between sentences, but many function differently in spoken discourse. The referents of cohesive markers such as *this*, *these*, and *you* are sometimes not readily identifiable in speech. For example:

Well *you* know, there was *this* guy, and here *we* were talking about, *you* know, girls, and all *that* sort of things ... and *here's* what he says ...

INFORMATION CONTENT

Since conversation involves both a speaker and a hearer, meanings are constructed cooperatively. A particular speaker does not say everything he or she wants to say in a single burst. Each speaker adds information a little at a time, often by repeating something of what has been said and then adding to it (Brown 1977). For example:

A: Are you pleased with the results?

B: Yes, I'm very pleased with them. They are better than I expected.

A: Is it impossible?

B: No, it's not impossible, just difficult.

Proposition markers such as *of course* and *really* may indicate the attitude of the speaker to preceding or subsequent propositions, and discourse markers such as *well*, *anyway*, *actually*, *of course*, and *now* signal the continuity between one utterance and another.

This means that the concept of coherence, as applied to conversational discourse, is very different from the way coherence is created in written discourse. Written discourse is planned, tightly organized, and generally the product of a single person. Spoken discourse is not preplanned, but is produced in ongoing time through mutual cooperation. Consequently, it presents meaning in a very different way from written discourse. Topics are developed gradually, and the conventions for topic development and topic shift are distinctive to the spoken register. Listeners must use cues such as *talking about that*, *reminds you of*. . . , *by the way*, *as far as that goes* to identify directions in topic development.

INTERACTIVE

Conversation is interactive. The listener's presence is indicated by gestures, movement, gaze, and facial expressions. Both speaker and listener send a variety of verbal and nonverbal signals back and forth indicating attention, interest, understanding, or lack of it (Murphy and Candlin 1979). The degree of formality or informality of the interaction may

also be signaled by the presence or absence of idioms, humor, and colloquial expressions, or by the use of solidarity markers such as *you see* or *you know*.

Design

The factors we have just reviewed indicate some of the central processes of listening comprehension and ways in which spoken discourse differs from written text. The application of such information to the teaching of listening comprehension occurs in the design component of methodology; it enables the identification of component micro-skills that provide the focus for instructional activities. Design thus refers to the operationalization of information and theory into a form from which objectives can be formulated and learning experiences planned. The design phase in curriculum development consists of:

Assessment of learner needs. This refers to procedures aimed at identifying the type of listening skills the learner requires, according to situations and purposes the listener will encounter.

Isolation of micro-skills. From the information obtained from needs analysis and from an analysis of the features of the target-language discourse that the learner will encounter (e.g., conversation, lectures), particular listening skills are isolated that correspond to the listening abilities the learner requires. The product of this operation is a skills taxonomy.

Diagnostic testing. From proficiency or diagnostic testing, a profile is established of the learner's present listening abilities. Particular micro-skills from the skills taxonomy are then selected.

Formulation of instructional objectives. Using information from diagnostic or proficiency testing, instructional objectives for a listening comprehension program can be developed.

These procedures are essential before instructional activities can be selected or developed. Let us now consider each of these dimensions in turn.

Needs assessment

Needs assessment examines the purposes behind listening skills and analyzes the situations, activities, and tasks in which students will be involved as second-language learners. Listening purposes vary according to whether learners are involved in listening as a component of social interaction (e.g., conversation listening), listening for information, academic listening (e.g., lectures), listening for pleasure (e.g., radio, movies, television), or for some other reason. Needs-assessment procedures may involve interviews with learners, participant observation, questionnaires,

target-discourse analysis, literature surveys of related research, and other measures designed to obtain a profile of learner needs and to establish priorities among them.

Taxonomy of listening skills

Taxonomies of micro-skills involved in different types of listening are developed from a variety of sources, including needs analysis, discourse analysis, and related research. The analysis of listening processes and features of spoken discourse that were discussed in the first section of this chapter suggests that micro-skills such as the following are required for conversational listening:

Micro-skills: conversational listening

1. ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods
2. ability to discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the target language
3. ability to recognize the stress patterns of words
4. ability to recognize the rhythmic structure of English
5. ability to recognize the functions of stress and intonation to signal the information structure of utterances
6. ability to identify words in stressed and unstressed positions
7. ability to recognize reduced forms of words
8. ability to distinguish word boundaries
9. ability to recognize typical word-order patterns in the target language
10. ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics
11. ability to detect key words (i.e., those that identify topics and propositions)
12. ability to guess the meanings of words from the contexts in which they occur
13. ability to recognize grammatical word classes (parts of speech)
14. ability to recognize major syntactic patterns and devices
15. ability to recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse
16. ability to recognize elliptical forms of grammatical units and sentences
17. ability to detect sentence constituents
18. ability to distinguish between major and minor constituents
19. ability to detect meanings expressed in differing grammatical forms/sentence types (i.e., that a particular meaning may be expressed in different ways)
20. ability to recognize the communicative functions of utterances, according to situations, participants, goals
21. ability to reconstruct or infer situations, goals, participants, procedures
22. ability to use real-world knowledge and experience to work out purposes, goals, settings, procedures
23. ability to predict outcomes from events described
24. ability to infer links and connections between events
25. ability to deduce causes and effects from events
26. ability to distinguish between literal and implied meanings
27. ability to identify and reconstruct topics and coherent structure from on-going discourse involving two or more speakers

28. ability to recognize markers of coherence in discourse, and to detect such relations as main idea, supporting idea, given information, new information, generalization, exemplification
29. ability to process speech at different rates
30. ability to process speech containing pauses, errors, corrections
31. ability to make use of facial, paralinguistic, and other clues to work out meanings
32. ability to adjust listening strategies to different kinds of listener purposes or goals
33. ability to signal comprehension or lack of comprehension, verbally and nonverbally

Diagnostic testing or detailed analysis of results of proficiency tests allows particular micro-skills to be further operationalized. Micro-skills relevant to academic listening include the following:

Micro-skills: academic listening (listening to lectures)

1. ability to identify purpose and scope of lecture
2. ability to identify topic of lecture and follow topic development
3. ability to identify relationships among units within discourse (e.g., major ideas, generalizations, hypotheses, supporting ideas, examples)
4. ability to identify role of discourse markers in signaling structure of a lecture (e.g., conjunctions, adverbs, gambits, routines)
5. ability to infer relationships (e.g., cause, effect, conclusion)
6. ability to recognize key lexical items related to subject/topic
7. ability to deduce meanings of words from context
8. ability to recognize markers of cohesion
9. ability to recognize function of intonation to signal information structure (e.g., pitch, volume, pace, key)
10. ability to detect attitude of speaker toward subject matter
11. ability to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual
12. ability to follow lecture despite differences in accent and speed
13. familiarity with different styles of lecturing: formal, conversational, read, unplanned
14. familiarity with different registers: written versus colloquial
15. ability to recognize irrelevant matter: jokes, digressions, meanderings
16. ability to recognize function of nonverbal cues as markers of emphasis and attitude
17. knowledge of classroom conventions (e.g., turn taking, clarification requests)
18. ability to recognize instructional/learner tasks (e.g., warnings, suggestions, recommendations, advice, instructions)

The preceding taxonomies are suggestive of the sort of information that curriculum developers should aim to obtain from tests and other sources.

Diagnostic testing assessment

Diagnostic tests and assessment procedures give a detailed breakdown of how learners perform with respect to particular micro-skills. A good

The context of language teaching

example of how detailed information on learner ability can be obtained from the use of a listening-proficiency rating scale is provided by an instrument developed by Brindley (1982). By means of interviews, a profile of the student's learning ability is built up, and the learner is classified into one of eight levels ranging from minimal to native-speaker-like. Brindley describes characteristics of a learner at the second level on the scale in the following way:

Listening comprehension

Able to understand enough to manage a very limited interchange about areas of immediate need. Can understand most predictable requests for basic personal and family information of the kind required by officials, though repetition often necessary if questions are not phrased in familiar form.

Can recognize a few basic intonation patterns (e.g., Yes/no questions).

Little understanding of syntax. Meaning deduced from juxtaposition of words and context. Still responds to isolated words in connected speech.

Can handle very short, simple, ritual social exchanges but rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord.

Can identify individual items in very short, simple, recorded passages relevant to needs. May get global meaning but would need more than one hearing.

However misunderstandings frequent when *s/he* cannot see person speaking. When *s/he* does not understand, can usually ask very simply for repetition.

Characteristic problems

Has great difficulty coping with subjects other than immediate priorities.

Finds longer utterances (especially those containing subordinate clauses) very hard to understand, owing to limitations on short-term memory load.

Often fails to understand questions which require other than a short, concrete answer (e.g., *why* or *how* questions).

Idiomatic expressions (even commonly used ones related to priority areas) normally not understood. Only understands when questions/statements are phrased in simplest, non-idiomatic form.

Has great difficulty using grammatical cues to extrapolate meaning. What seems clear to a native speaker would often be misinterpreted or seen as ambiguous by a listener at this level, owing to his/her inability to recognize the form and function of many syntactic structures.

May identify occasional words in a conversation between native speakers but could not identify topic.

Similar-sounding words/segments often confused, causing misunderstandings.

(Brindley 1982: 1)

Using information like this together with a skills taxonomy, it is possible to identify the micro-skills that would be most crucial for a learner at this level. Among the micro-skills that this type of learner lacks, for example, are:

1. ability to identify and reconstruct topics from ongoing discourse
2. ability to recognize typical word-order patterns in English
3. ability to recognize major syntactic patterns in English

By systematically comparing information in the skills taxonomy with the learner profile, it is now possible to formulate objectives for the target group of learners.

Formulation of objectives

Objectives translate the content identified in the skills selection process into a statement of what the student is expected to be able to do at the end of a course of instruction. Objectives defined this way are also known as *behavioral objectives* (Nicholls and Nicholls 1972). They serve as goals toward which the teacher should be aiming in a course, and therefore help determine the choice of appropriate methodology and classroom procedures. They also enable teachers to assess the extent to which learning has been accomplished. Basically, what is required is a clearly set out group of statements identifying what is to be achieved - methodology and the syllabus identify the means; objectives specify the ends. Objectives thus break down the micro-skills into descriptions of behavior or performance in terms that can be taught and tested. Objectives for the hypothetical target group identified above, for example, might be stated in the following terms:

1. The student will have a listening vocabulary of approximately 800 words, including dates, time, and numbers up to 100.
2. The student can recognize the different intonation patterns used for questions, statements, instructions.
3. The student can understand yes/no questions and Wh-questions on topics connected with home life, the family, school, free time, health, shopping, personal identification.
4. The student can understand common phrases used in short conversations and interviews on the above topics.
5. The student can identify the topics of conversations between native speakers on the above topics.
6. The student can understand utterances within an 800-word vocabulary in which the following grammatical constructions are used: sub V comp, sub Vobj.
7. The student can understand utterances within an 800-word vocabulary containing subordinate and coordinating clauses.

From the formulation of instructional objectives we are now able to consider the development of instructional procedures and activities that enable the objectives to be realized. These are questions of procedure, that is, of techniques and exercise types.

Procedure

In teaching listening comprehension our aim is to provide opportunities for the learner to acquire particular micro-skills, those individual listening abilities that we have identified and used in specifying particular teaching objectives. In teaching listening we can manipulate two variables, both of which serve to develop ability in particular skill areas. We can either manipulate the *input*, that is, the language the learner hears, controlling for selected features such as grammatical complexity, topic, and rate of delivery, or we can manipulate the *tasks* we set for the learner. Manipulation of either (or both) is directed toward developing particular micro-skills.

INPUT MICRO-SKILLS TASKS

In examining procedures for teaching listening comprehension, we will focus on some general criteria that can be applied to the evaluation of exercises and classroom procedures and then look at techniques and procedures themselves.

Criteria for evaluating activities and exercises

In teaching listening skills our aim is to provide comprehensible, focused input and purposeful listening tasks that develop competence in particular listening abilities. The following criteria serve as a checklist in developing listening tasks (Stanley 1978, British Council 1981, McKeating 1981, Maley and Moulding 1981, Porter and Roberts 1981, Thomas 1982).

Content validity. Does the activity practice listening comprehension or something else? How closely does the input or task relate to the micro-skills that listening comprehension involves? Many listening materials contain activities that depend more on reading or general intelligence than on listening skills. The question of content validity raises the issue of whether the activity adequately or actually makes use of skills and behavior that are part of listening in the real world. Two related factors have to do with memory and purposefulness.

Listening comprehension or memory? We saw that a variety of processing activities in listening precede storage of information in long-term memory. Many listening activities focus on retrieval of information from long-term memory rather than on the processing activities themselves. An exercise involving listening to a passage and responding to true/false

questions about the content of it typically makes use of memory rather than comprehension.

Purposefulness and transferability. Does the activity reflect a purpose for listening that approximates authentic real-life listening? Do the abilities the exercise develops transfer to real-life listening purposes, or is the learner simply developing the ability to perform classroom exercises? An activity that makes use of news broadcasts as input, for example, should reflect the reasons why people typically listen to news broadcasts, such as listening for information about events. Cloze exercises requiring the learner to supply grammatical words after listening to the news item do not reflect the purposes for which people listen to news broadcasts. It is not a situation that corresponds to any real-life listening purpose, and therefore involves a low degree of transfer.

Testing or teaching. Does the activity or set of procedures assume that a set of skills is already acquired and simply provide opportunities for the learner to practice them, or does it assume that the skills are not known and try to help the learner acquire them? A great many listening activities test rather than teach. For example, a set of true/false questions following a passage on a tape might indicate how much of the material the learner can remember, but this kind of activity in no way helps the learner develop the ability to grasp main ideas or extract relevant details. The amount of preparation the learner is given before a listening task is often important in giving a teaching rather than a testing focus to an activity. Pre-listening activities generally have this purpose. They activate the learner's script and set a purpose for listening. They may take the form of discussion, questions, or a short paragraph to read that creates the script, providing information about the situation, the characters, and the events. Activities that teach rather than test may require much more use of pre-listening tasks and tasks completed as the student listens than post-listening tasks.

Authenticity. To what degree does the input resemble natural discourse? Although much authentic discourse may be too disfluent or difficult to understand without contextual support, materials should aim for relative authenticity if they are to prepare listeners for real listening situations. Many current commercial listening materials are spoken at an artificially slow pace, in prestige dialects that are not typical of ordinary speech. They are often oral readings of written material articulated in a precise "acting" style, lacking the pauses and self-corrections of natural speech. Furthermore, the value of such materials must be examined in the light of Krashen's (1982) proposal that authentic learning experiences should provide an opportunity for *acquisition*; that is, they should provide comprehensible input that requires negotiation of meaning and that contains linguistic features a little beyond the learner's current level of competence.

Exercise types

In developing classroom materials and activities we can manipulate the input or the tasks. Input, for example, may be in the form of dialogue or monologue. Dialogue may be scripted or unscripted, between native speakers, between native and non-native speakers, or between non-native speakers. Difficulty in both dialogue and monologue may vary according to the rate of delivery, level of vocabulary, topic, information content, fluency (amount of pausing, errors), and coherence. Tasks may vary according to whether they require *global comprehension* (where the learner is required to attempt to understand the overall meaning) or *partial comprehension* (where only comprehension of specific items is required) (Blundell and Stokes 1981, Schecter 1984). Tasks may also vary according to whether they require a *mechanical*, *meaningful*, or *communicative* response (Paulston 1971). A task requiring a mechanical response, for example, would be a discrimination task where the learner is required to distinguish between two words or sounds and where comprehension is not required. A meaningful response would be one in which comprehension of the input is required, but no creative abilities are called into play, for example, when a learner has to match one of two sentences to one he or she hears. A communicative response is one in which the learner has to create a suitable response on the basis of what is understood and where interpretation, adaptation, and the addition of new information are required. For example, the listener may hear a problem discussed and then have to suggest a solution. The criterion for selecting and evaluating tasks, however, is not their interest or ingenuity but the degree in which they relate to teaching rather than testing objectives. Among common task types in materials are:

Matching or distinguishing. Choosing a response in written or pictorial form that corresponds with what was heard (e.g., placing pictures in a sequence that matches a story or set of events; choosing a picture to match a situation, such as listening to a radio advertisement and finding the product from a set of pictures).

Transferring. Exercises of this type involve receiving information in one form and transferring the information or part of it into another form (e.g., listening to a discussion about a house and then sketching the house).

Transcribing. Listening, and then writing down what was heard. Dictation is the most common example of this activity.

Scanning. Exercises in which listeners must extract selected items by scanning the input in order to find a specific piece of information (e.g., listening to a news broadcast and identifying the name of the winning party in an election).

Extending. Exercises that involve going beyond what is provided, such as reconstructing a dialogue when alternate lines are missing or providing a conclusion to a story.

Condensing. Reducing what is heard to an outline of main points, such as is required in taking notes.

Answering. Answering questions from the input. Different kinds of questions will focus on different levels of listening (e.g., questions that require recall of details, those that require inferences and deductions, those that require evaluation or reactions).

Predicting. Guessing or predicting outcomes, causes, relationships, and so forth, based on information presented in a conversation or narrative.

Applications

As an example of approach, design, and procedural elements of listening comprehension methodology, we will now show how a listening exercise that was presented to a materials development class at the University of Hawaii was adapted by the students in that class to give it a more relevant focus. This discussion also illustrates the sorts of activities that are useful in teaching workshops for teachers on developing materials for listening comprehension.

The text selected was *Have You Heard?* (Underwood 1979), which is described on the book's jacket as providing

listening comprehension practice for students of English as a foreign language who have had little opportunity to hear native English speakers. Each of the twenty units contains recorded extracts centered around a particular language function. The recordings are of spontaneous conversations in a range of accents and bring the students as close as possible to a real life situation.

The task set for the teacher trainees who were in this course was first to examine the text and the exercises in terms of content validity, testing, or teaching, and the other criteria discussed above. It was found that the existing exercises in the text mainly tested memory rather than listening comprehension, and many were found to have little relation to listening. In considering alternative exercises, the materials were first examined to determine the types of listening tasks and micro-skills that the conversational samples involved. From these, objectives and exercises were developed.¹

Unit 1 of the text, for example, focuses on "people talking about things they like." The unit contains three short conversations on the topic by different people. The first is entitled "Felix talks about his job as a school-master." The following pre-listening information is given:

The exercises that will be presented here were prepared by Andrew Harper, Esther Soong, Phillip Pinsent, Holly Uyeda, Joel Wiskin, Florida Abe, Tereseta Kawamoto, and Pi-chong Suo

The context of language teaching

Felix shows his pleasure by mentioning the good things about his job. He begins by saying that he decided quite quickly about what he wanted to do as a job.

A few difficult vocabulary items are presented, then the teacher is instructed to play the tape. True/false exercises, vocabulary exercises, and a transcription/dictation task follow. The conversational listening extract is as follows:

So there was no great lengthy process deciding what I was going to do - but I don't feel I've made a mistake - I enjoy it - I enjoy the company of other members of the staff in the staff room where they are colleagues of yours but you're not in a structured system where they are your boss or you are theirs - everyone is in the same boat - everyone is in the same level and yet - you don't actually work with one another - you just work with the same boys - and therefore I think that unlike an office situation - you get to know the ... the other members of the staff - as friends more than as workmates - and also I enjoy - the difference in the job - it isn't the same thing every year - in a yearly situation - you can do things a different way the second year, the third year - and I enjoy the differences it brings - every day - different classes, different age groups, different attitudes ... [transcribed from tape]

It was decided to replace all the exercises suggested in the text. In developing alternative exercises the trainees produced the following:

Objectives

Listen for general understanding of the gist of a conversation.
Identify the speaker's attitude toward a topic.

Micro-skills

Identify and follow the topic of a conversation.
Recognize vocabulary for expressing positive and negative attitudes.
Infer speaker's attitude from reasons given.
Infer meanings of words from context.

Pre-listening activities

Students work in groups and discuss what makes a job enjoyable or undesirable.
Students rank their findings.
Students discuss the advantages and disadvantages of school teaching.
(The goal of the pre-listening activities is to activate background knowledge or scripts and to prepare students for some of the vocabulary they will hear.)

Teaching procedure

1. On first listening, students are given a simple task. They are instructed to answer the following questions as they listen:
 - a) What is Felix's job?
 - b) How does he feel about his job? Does he like it or not?(By positing the task before the students listen to the tape, the listeners are given a purpose for listening, which forces them to focus on selected

information. They can also compare information they hear with information they obtained from their pre-listening group discussions.)

2. After listening to the tape and discussing their answers, the students are given a more specific task to be completed during a second listening:
Which of the following does Felix say are important for him about his job?
the salary not having a fixed routine
the holidays the power it gives
not having a boss his colleagues
3. During a third listening, students answer true/false questions:
 - a) It took Felix a long time to choose a job.
 - b) Felix believes he chose the right job
 - c) Felix says his job is like working in an office.
 - d) Felix wants to change his job.
 - e) Felix has to do the same thing every year.
4. The post-listening exercise involves deducing the meanings of words from the context in which they were used in the conversation:
What do these expressions in the conversation mean?,
"To be in the same boat with other people"
"To enjoy the company of other people"

The exercises suggested by the trainees thus involve primarily pre-listening and "complete-while-listening" tasks, rather than the usual battery of post-listening exercises. They prepare the students for listening before listening begins and focus on a level of comprehension relevant to conversational listening.

Conclusion

The teaching of listening comprehension, or of any language skill, involves considering the objectives we are teaching toward and the micro-skills our procedures cover. An educated response is dependent, in turn, on how much of any attempt we have made to appreciate the nature of the listening comprehension process itself. Any informed methodology or teaching program looks both at techniques and classroom routines, and beyond them, to the broader principles that serve as their justification.