

Second Thoughts on Teaching Listening

Jack C. Richards

The status of listening in language programs has undergone substantial change in recent years. From being a neglected skill relegated to passing treatment as a minor strand within a speaking course it now appears as a core course in many language programs. The development of good listening skills is seen not only as something valuable for its own sake but as something that supports the growth of other aspects of language use, such as speaking and reading. One reason for the increased attention to the teaching of listening is a pragmatic one. Many learners need good listening skills to support the demands made on them in school, work, travel or other settings and language institutes and publishers have responded to these needs by providing a range of courses and materials to support the teaching of listening. At the same time the status of listening within language learning theory has also been strengthened and a body of research now exists which provides a deeper understanding of the processes involved in understanding communication in a second language. Some SLA theorists (e.g. Krashen) have also stressed the role of listening in facilitating second language acquisition. In a sense then the teaching of listening has never been in a better state, with few questioning its usefulness and with a wide variety of interesting course materials on the market for teachers to choose from.

Yet there are still lingering questions concerning the goals of L2 listening instruction. The present paper seeks to explore some of these questions and in so doing, raise some basic questions concerning a pedagogy of teaching second language listening. To do this I will examine listening from two perspectives- ***listening as comprehension*** and ***listening as acquisition***.

The current orthodoxy: listening as comprehension

From a current perspective, listening and listening comprehension are essentially the same thing. Writers on the teaching of listening in the last 20 years (including myself) have advocated an approach to the teaching of listening that is predicated upon the following assumptions:

- Listening serves the goal of extracting meaning from messages
- In order to do this learners have to be taught how to use both bottom up and top down processes in arriving at an understanding of messages
- The language of utterances, i.e. the precise words, syntax, expressions used by speakers are temporary carriers of meaning. Once meaning has been identified there is no further need to attend to the form of messages.

In classroom materials a variety of strategies and techniques are used to practice listening as comprehension. These include:

- Predicting the meaning of messages
- Identifying key words and ignoring others while listening
- Using background knowledge to facilitate selective listening
- Keeping the broad meaning of a text in mind while listening

Tasks employed in classroom materials seek to enable listeners to recognize and act on the general, specific or implied meaning of utterances, and these include sequencing tasks

true-false comprehension tasks, picture identification tasks, summary tasks, dicto comp as well as to develop effective listening strategies (e.g. Mendelsohn 1995).

Although what is sometimes called "discriminative listening" (Wolvin and Coakely 1996) is sometimes employed (i.e. listening to distinguish auditory stimuli), it is generally taught as an initial stage in the listening process, the ultimate goal of which is comprehension.

Activities that are typically not employed when comprehension is the focus of listening are those which require accurate recognition and recall of words, syntax and expressions that occurred in the input. Such activities would include dictation, cloze exercises, identifying differences between a spoken and written text. Activities such as these are discouraged because they focus on listening for words rather than listening for meaning, i.e. the emphasize bottom-up listening processes rather than top down ones. Writing of post-listening activities, for example, Field comments:

We no longer spend time examining the grammar of the listening text: that reflected a typically structuralist view of listening as a means of reinforcing recently-learned materials.

A typical lesson sequence from the current position involves a three part lesson sequence consisting of pre-listening, while listening and post-listening. The pre-listening phase prepares the students for practice in listening for comprehension through activities involving activating prior knowledge, making predictions, and reviewing key vocabulary. The while-listening phase focuses on comprehension through exercises which require selective listening, gist listening, sequencing etc. The post listening phase typically involves a response to comprehension and may require students to give opinions about a topic, etc. Field proposes the following as the format of a good listening lesson:

***Pre-listening**

Set context: Create motivation

***Listening:**

Extensive listening (followed by questions on context, attitude)

Pre-set task/Pre-set questions

Intensive listening

Checking answers

***Post-listening**

Examining functional language

Inferring vocabulary meaning

A complementary perspective: listening as acquisition

Few would question the format for a listening lesson described above, when the focus is listening as comprehension. But another crucial role has been proposed for listening in second language acquisition theory, namely its role in facilitating second language development. Krashen and other advocates of the natural approach for example have argued for the role of comprehensible input in language acquisition but have said little concerning *how* comprehension is supposed to facilitate language learning. On the one hand, common sense tells us that we can learn nothing from

listening to a language unless we understand it. I can listen to hundred of hours of Russian on the radio, for example, but will not learn a word of Russian unless I have some understanding of what is said. On the other hand we can all cite examples of people who have a receptive understanding of a language but little productive competence in the language. Spanish speakers, for example, often report that while they can understand Portuguese, they cannot speak it. What then is the relationship between listening and language acquisition?

An answer to this question has been posed by Schmidt (1990), who has drawn attention to the role of consciousness in language learning, and in particular to the role of *noticing* in learning. His argument is that we won't learn anything from input we hear and understand unless we notice something about the input. Consciousness of features of the input can serve as a trigger which activates the first stage in the process of incorporating new linguistic features into ones language competence. As Slobin (1985:1164) remarked of L1 learning:

The only linguistic materials that can figure in language-making are stretches of speech that attract the child's attention to a sufficient degree to be noticed and held in memory.

Schmidt (1990,139) further clarifies this point in distinguishing between input (what the learner hears) and intake (that part of the input that the learner notices). Only intake can serve as the basis for language development. In his own study of his acquisition of Portuguese (Schmidt and Frota 1986), Schmidt found that there was a close connection between noticing features of the input, and their later emergence in his own speech.

My own anecdotal observation of my learning of foreign languages I have acquired as an adult (Indonesian and French) to varying levels of proficiency suggests another feature of intake that appears to be important if input is to become intake, that is, its linguistic complexity. Krashen proposed the comprehensible input hypothesis which states that people acquire language best by understanding input that is slightly beyond their current level of competence. I would propose that input can best serve as the basis for intake when it contains features not already in the learners' linguistic repertoire and which are at an appropriate difficulty level for his or her communicative needs. Thus I have often observed when listening to other second

language speakers of Indonesian or French, that features of their language use are often more noticeable to me (and hence more retainable) if their language proficiency is one or two steps ahead of mine. I assume that this is because their language development is where I hope to be with continued learning and practice. The native speaker's language use on the other hand is often too complex and linguistically sophisticated to serve as the source of intake.

In order for language development to take place, however, more appears to be required than simply noticing features of the input. The learner has to try to incorporate new linguistic items into his or her language repertoire. This involves a process that has been variously referred to as restructuring, complexification and producing *stretched output*. Van Patten (1993, 436) suggests that restructuring refers to

... those [processes] that mediate the incorporation of intake into the developing system. Since the internalization of intake is not mere accumulation of discrete bits of data, data have to "fit in" in some way and sometimes the accommodation of a particular set of data causes changes in the rest of the system.

Complexification and stretching of output occurs in contexts

...where the learner needs to produce output which the current interlanguage system cannot handle ...[and so] ... pushes the limits of the interlanguage system to handle that output.

Tarone and Liu 1995, 120-121

In other words, learners need to take part in activities which require them to try out and experiment in using newly noticed language forms in order for new learning items to become incorporated into their linguistic repertoire.

What are the implications of this view of the role of listening in language learning, to the teaching of listening? I would suggest that we can firstly distinguish between situations where comprehension only is an appropriate instructional goal and those where comprehension plus acquisition is a relevant focus. Examples of the former would be situations where listening to extract information is the primary focus of

listening, such as listening to lectures, listening to announcements, listening to sales presentations etc, and situations where listening serves primarily a transactional function, such as service encounters. In other cases, however, a listening course may be part of a general English course or linked to a speaking course, and in these situations both listening as comprehension and listening as acquisition should be the focus. Listening texts and materials can then be exploited, first as the basis for comprehension, and second as the basis for acquisition. What classroom strategies are appropriate in this case?

I would propose a two-part cycle of teaching activities as the basis for the listening as acquisition phase of a lesson, namely:

a) noticing activities

b) restructuring activities

Noticing activities involve returning to the listening texts that served as the basis for comprehension activities and using them as the basis for language awareness. For example students can listen again to a recording in order to:

- identify differences between what they hear and a printed version of the text
- complete a cloze version of the text
- complete sentences stems taken from the text
- check off from a list, expressions that occurred in the text

Restructuring activities are oral or written tasks that involve productive use of selected items from the listening text. Such activities could include:

- in the case of conversational texts, pair reading of the tape scripts
- written sentence- completion tasks requiring use of expressions and other linguistic items that occurred in the texts
- dialog practice based on dialogs that incorporate items from the text
- role plays in which students are required to use key language from the texts

I am hence advocating that in contexts where comprehension and acquisition are the goals of a listening course, a two part strategy is appropriate in classroom teaching and instructional materials, namely:

Phase 1: listening as comprehension

Use of the materials as advocated above with a lesson plan along the lines described by Field

Phase 2: listening as acquisition

The listening texts used in phase 1 are now used as the basis for acquisition activities, making use of noticing activities and restructuring activities

A word of warning

There is a danger in advocating the use of listening texts as a basis for language acquisition, and that is, teachers may misunderstand the reasons for recommending this teaching strategy, they might ignore the importance of teaching listening as comprehension and revert to using listening texts as the basis for a testing-approach to teaching listening, i.e. concentrating exclusively on accurate identification of the content and language of a text.

A second concern is the difficulty of creating noticing and restructuring tasks that do not bore the students to death. In one of my earliest attempts to build noticing into classroom materials (Richards and Hull 1986), Hull and I developed a set of speaking activities around role plays. A novel feature of the materials was that after students had practiced each role play, they listened to a recording of native speakers performing the same role play and completed exercises that required identification of linguistic features employed by the native speakers. The cycle of activities used in the materials soon induced boredom on the part of learners, however. Once they had carried out the role play themselves, there was little motivation to listen to the same role play again. Exclusive dependence on a single exercise type (close dialogs) as the basis for the noticing exercises likewise soon became repetitive and tiresome. The challenge for materials' writers therefore is how to create noticing activities that match the interest level possible when teaching listening as comprehension.

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