The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

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FIGURES

ABBREVIATIONS

AAVE	African American Vernacular English
CALL	computer-assisted language learning
CDA	critical discourse analysis
CLT	communicative language teaching
EAL	English as an additional language
EAP	English for academic purposes
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELT	English language teaching
EMT	English as a mother tongue
EOP	English for occupational purposes
ESL	English as a second language
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
ESP	English for specific purposes
EST	English for science and technology
EWL	English as a world language
IELTS	International English Language Testing Service
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
IRF	initiation, response, follow-up (see Glossary)
L1	first language
L2	second language
NES	native English speaker
SLA	second language acquisition
TBL	task-based learning
TEFL	Teaching of English as a foreign language
TESL	Teaching of English as a second language
TESOL	Teaching of English to speakers of other languages
TOEFL	Test of English as a foreign language

Listening

Michael Rost

Introduction

The term **listening** is used in language teaching to refer to a complex process that allows us to understand spoken language. Listening, the most widely used language skill, is often used in conjunction with the other skills of speaking, reading and writing. Listening is not only a skill area in language performance, but is also a critical means of acquiring a second language (L2). Listening is the channel in which we process language in real time – employing pacing, units of encoding and pausing that are unique to spoken language.

As a goal-oriented activity, listening involves 'bottom-up' processing (in which listeners attend to data in the incoming speech signals) and 'top-down' processing (in which listeners utilise prior knowledge and expectations to create meaning). Both bottom-up and top-down processing are assumed to take place at various levels of cognitive organisation: phonological, grammatical, lexical and propositional. This complex process is often described as a 'parallel processing model' of language understanding: representations at these various levels create activation at other levels. The entire network of interactions serves to produce a 'best match' that fits all of the levels (McClelland 1987; Cowan 1995).

Background

Listening in language teaching has undergone several important influences, as the result of developments in anthropology, education, linguistics, sociology, and even global politics. From the time foreign languages were formally taught until the late nineteenth century, language learning was presented primarily in a written mode, with the role of descriptive grammars, bilingual dictionaries and 'problem sentences' for correct translation occupying the central role. Listening began to assume an important role in language teaching during the late-nineteenth-century Reform Movement, when linguists sought to elaborate a psychological theory of child language acquisition and apply it to the teaching of foreign languages. Resulting from this movement, the spoken language became the definitive source for and means of foreign language learning. Accuracy of perception and clarity of auditory memory became focal language learning skills.

This focus on speech was given a boost in the 1930s and 1940s when anthropologists began to study and describe the world's spoken languages. Influenced by this anthropological movement, Bloomfield declared that 'one learns to understand and speak a language primarily by hearing and imitating native speakers' (Bloomfield 1942). In the 1940s American applied linguists formalised this

'oral approach' into the audiolingual method with an emphasis on intensive oral–aural drills and extensive use of the language laboratory. The underlying assumption of the method was that learners could be 'trained' through intensive, structured and graded input to change their hearing 'habits'.

In contrast to this behaviourist approach, there was a growing interest in the United Kingdom in situational approaches. Firth and his contemporaries (see, e.g., Firth 1957; Chomsky 1957) believed that 'the context of situation' – rather than linguistic units themselves – determined the meaning of utterances. This implied that meaning is a function of the situational and cultural context in which it occurs, and that language understanding involved an integration of linguistic comprehension and non-linguistic interpretation.

Other key background influences are associated with the work of Chomsky and Hymes. A gradual acceptance of Chomsky's innatist views (see Chomsky 1965) led to the notion of the meaning-seeking mind and the concept of a 'natural approach' to language learning. In a natural approach, the learner works from an internal syllabus and requires input data (not necessarily in a graded order) to construct the target language system. In response to Chomsky's notion of language competence, Hymes (1971 [1972, 1979]) proposed the notion of 'communicative competence', stating that what is crucial is not so much a better understanding of how language is structured internally, but a better understanding of how language is used.

This sociological approach – eventually formalised as the discipline of 'conversation analysis' (CA) – had an eventual influence on language teaching syllabus design. The Council of Europe proposed defining a 'common core' of communicative language which all learners would be expected to acquire at the early stages of language learning (Council of Europe 1971). The communicative language teaching (CLT) movement, which had its roots in the 'threshold syllabus' of van Ek (1973), began to view listening as an integral part of communicative competence. Listening for meaning became the primary focus and finding relevant input for the learner assumed greater importance.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, applied linguists recognised that listening was the primary channel by which the learner gains access to L2 'data', and that it therefore serves as the trigger for acquisition. Subsequent work in applied linguistics (see especially Long 1985b; Chaudron 1988; Pica 1994) has helped to define the role of listening input and interaction in second language acquisition. Since 1980, listening has been viewed as a primary vehicle for language learning (Richards 1985; Richards and Rodgers 1986; Rost 1990).

Research

Four areas affecting how listening is integrated into L2 pedagogy are reviewed here; these are: listening in SLA, speech processing, listening in interactive settings and strategy use.

LISTENING IN SLA

In second language acquisition (SLA) research, it is the 'linguistic environment' that serves as the stage for SLA. This environment – the speakers of the target language and their speech to the L2 learners – provides linguistic input in the form of listening opportunities embedded in social and academic situations. In order to acquire the language, learners must come to understand the language in these situations. This accessibility is made possible in part through accommodations made by native speakers to make language comprehension possible and in part through strategies the learner enacts to make the speech comprehensible.

Building on the research that showed a relationship between input adjustments and message comprehension, Krashen (1982) claimed that 'comprehensible input' was a necessary condition for language learning. In his 'input hypothesis', Krashen says further development from the learner's current stage of language knowledge can only be achieved by the learner 'comprehending' language that contains linguistic items (lexis, syntax, morphology) at a level slightly above the

learner's current knowledge (*i* + 1). Krashen claimed that comprehension is necessary in order for input to become 'intake', i.e. language data that is assimilated and used to promote further development. The ability to understand new language, Krashen maintained, is made possible by speech adjustments made to learners, in addition to the learner's use of shared knowledge of the context (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991).

Although Krashen does not refer to strategic adjustments made by the learner to understand new language, the work of Pica *et al.* (1996) examines the role of adjustments in great detail. Their research has helped delineate how different task types (e.g. one-way vs. two-way information gap exchanges), interaction demands of tasks and interaction adjustments made by speaker and listener address the L2 learner's needs and boost subsequent development. This research outlines the dimensions of activity and strategy use required for successful listening development.

SPEECH PROCESSING

Speech-processing research provides important insights into L2 learning. Several factors are activated in speech perception (phonetic quality, prosodic patterns, pausing and speed of input), all of which influence the comprehensibility of input. While it is generally accepted that there is a common store of semantic information (single coding) in memory that is used in both first language (L1) and L2 speech comprehension, research shows that there are separate stores of phonological information (dual coding) for speech (Soares and Grosjean 1984; Sharwood Smith 1994). Semantic knowledge required for language understanding (scripts and schemata related to real world people, places and actions) is accessed through phonological tagging of the language that is heard. As such, facility with the phonological code of the L2 – and with the parallel cognitive processes of grammatical parsing and word recognition – is proposed as the basis for keeping up with the speed of spoken language (Magiste 1985).

Research in spoken-language recognition shows that each language has its own 'preferred strategies' for aural decoding, which are readily acquired by the L1 child, but often only partially acquired by the L2 learner. Preferred strategies involve four fundamental properties of spoken language:

1. the phonological system: the phonemes used in a particular language, typically only 30 or 40 out of hundreds of possible phonemes;
2. phonotactic rules: the sound sequences that a language allows to make up syllables; i.e. variations of what sounds can start or end syllables, whether the 'peak' of the syllable can be a simple or complex or lengthened vowel and whether the ending of the syllable can be a vowel or a consonant;
3. tone melodies: the characteristic variations in high, low, rising and falling tones to indicate lexical or discourse meanings;
4. the stress system: the way in which lexical stress is fixed within an utterance.

In 'bounded' (or 'syllable-timed') languages – such as Spanish and Japanese – stress is located at fixed distances from the boundaries of words. In 'unbounded' (or 'stress-timed') languages – such as English and Arabic – the main stress is pulled towards an utterance's focal syllable. Bounded languages consist of binary rhythmic units (or feet) and listeners tend to hear the language in a binary fashion, as pairs of equally strong syllables. Unbounded languages have no limit on the size of a foot, and listeners tend to hear the language in clusters of syllables organised by either trochaic (strong–weak) rhythm or iambic (weak–strong) rhythm. Stress-timing produces numerous linked or assimilated consonants and reduced (or weakened) vowels so that the pronunciation of words often seems slurred.

Differences in a learner's L1 and L2 with respect to any of these possible distinctions – phonology system, phonotactic rules, use of tone and use of stress – are likely to cause difficulties

in spoken-word recognition, at least initially and until ample attention is devoted to learning new strategies. Similarities in a learner's L1 and L2 with respect to one or more of these distinctions are likely to allow the learner greater ease and success with listening, and with word recognition in particular. For example, Japanese learners often have difficulty identifying key words in spoken English, due in part to the different stress systems; on the other hand, Danish learners of English typically have little difficulty learning to follow colloquial conversation, due in part to the similarities of stress, tone, phonology and phonotactic rules in English and Danish.

Of these four components in word recognition, stress is often reported to be the most problematic in L2 listening. In English, L2 listeners must come to use a metrical segmentation strategy that allows them to assume that a strong syllable is the onset of a new content word and that each 'pause unit' of speech contains one prominent content word (Cutler 1997).

Another research area related to speech perception is the effect of variable speech rate on comprehension. Findings clearly show that there is not an isomorphic relationship between speed of speech and comprehension (for a summary, see Flowerdew 1994b). One consistent finding is that the best aid to comprehension is to use normal speaking speed with extra pauses inserted.

LISTENING IN INTERACTIVE SETTINGS

Studies of L2 listening in conversational settings help explain the dynamics of interactive listening and the ways in which L2 speakers participate (or, conversely, are denied participation) in conversations. Such issues have been researched at the discourse analysis level, looking at how control and distribution of power is routinely employed through the structure (i.e. implicit rules) of interactions.

Research in cross-cultural pragmatics is relevant in understanding the dynamics of L2 listening in conversation. In general, cultures differ in their use of key conversation features, such as when to talk, how much to say, pacing and pausing in and between speaking turns, intonational emphasis, use of formulaic expressions, and indirectness (Tannen 1984b). The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP; Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989) documents examples of cultural differences in directness–indirectness in several languages and for a number of speech acts (notably apologies, requests and promises). Clearly, knowledge of speakers' cultural norms influences listening success.

Conversational analysis is used to explore problems that L2 listeners experience. Comprehension difficulties in conversation arise not only at the levels of phonological processing, grammatical parsing and word recognition, but also at the levels of informational packaging and conceptual representation of the content. Other comprehension problems include those triggered by elliptical utterances (in which an item is omitted because it is assumed to be understood) and difficulty in assessing the point of an utterance (speaker's intent). In any interaction such problems can be cumulative, leading to misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication.

Bremer *et al.* (1996) document many of the social procedures that L2 listeners must come to use as they become more successful listeners and participants in conversations. These procedures include identification of topic shifts, providing backchannelling or listenership cues, participating in conversational routines (providing obligatory responses), shifting to topic initiator role, and initiating queries and repair of communication problems. Much research on L2 listening in conversation clearly concludes that, in order to become successful participants in target-language conversation, listeners need to employ a great deal of 'interactional work' (including using clarification strategies) in addition to linguistic processing.

STRATEGY USE

Listening strategies are conscious plans to deal with incoming speech, particularly when the listener knows that he or she must compensate for incomplete input or partial understanding. For representative studies in this area, see Rost and Ross 1991; Kasper 1984; Vandergrift 1996.

Rost and Ross's (1991) study of paused texts found that more proficient listeners tend to use more 'hypothesis testing' (asking about specific information in the story) rather than 'lexical push-downs' (asking about word meanings) and 'global reprises' (asking for general repetition). They also report that, following training sessions, listeners at all levels could ask more hypothesis testing questions. Their comprehension, measured by written summaries, also improved as a result.

Kasper's (1984) study using 'think aloud' protocols found that L2 listeners tend to form an initial interpretation of a topic (a 'frame') and then stick to it, trying to fit incoming words and propositions into that frame. L1 listeners were better at recognising when they had made a mistake about the topic and were prepared to initiate a new frame.

Vandergrift's (1996) study involving retrospective self-report validated O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) strategy classifications. He found explicit examples of learner use of both meta-cognitive strategies (such as planning and monitoring), cognitive strategies (such as linguistic inferencing and elaborating) and socio-affective strategies (such as questioning and self-encouragement). He also found a greater (reported) use of metacognitive strategies at higher proficiency levels. Based on his findings, Vandergrift proposes a pedagogic plan for encouraging the use of metacognitive strategies at all proficiency levels.

Practice

The teaching of listening involves the selection of input sources (which may be live, or be recorded on audio or video), the chunking of input into segments for presentation, and an activity cycle for learners to engage in. Effective teaching involves:

- careful selection of input sources (appropriately authentic, interesting, varied and challenging);
- creative design of tasks (well-structured, with opportunities for learners to activate their own knowledge and experience and to monitor what they are doing);
- assistance to help learners enact effective listening strategies (metacognitive, cognitive, and social); and
- integration of listening with other learning purposes (with appropriate links to speaking, reading and writing).

This section reviews some of the key recommendations that have been made by language educators concerning the teaching of listening. The notion of listening for meaning, in contrast to listening for language practice, became a standard in teaching by the mid-1980s. Since then, many practitioners have proposed systems for teaching listening that have influenced the language teaching profession. These can be summarised as follows:

- Morley (1984) offers an array of examples of selective listening materials, using authentic information and information-focused activities (e.g. notional–informational listening practice, situation–functional listening practice, discrimination-oriented practice, sound–spelling listening practice).
- Ur (1984) emphasises the importance of having listening instruction resemble 'real-life listening' in which the listener has built a sense of purpose and expectation for listening and in which there is a necessity for a listener response.
- Anderson and Lynch (1988) provide helpful means for grading input types and organising tasks to maximise learner interaction.
- Underwood (1989) describes listening activities in terms of three phases: pre-, while- and post-listening activities. She demonstrates the utility of using 'authentic' conversations (many of which were surreptitiously recorded).
- Richards (1990) provides an accessible guide for teachers in constructing exercises promoting

'top-down' or 'bottom-up' processing and focusing on transactional or interactional layers of discourse.

- Rost (1991) formalises elements of listening pedagogy into four classes of 'active listening': global listening to focus on meaning, intensive listening to focus on form, selective listening to focus on specific outcomes and interactive listening to focus on strategy development.

- Nunan (1995c) provides a compendium of recipes for exercises for listening classes, organised in four parts: developing cognitive strategies (listening for the main idea, listening for details, predicting), developing listening with other skills, listening to authentic material and using technology.

- Lynch (1996) outlines the types of negotiation tasks that can be used with recorded and 'live' inputs in order to require learners to focus on clarification processes. Lynch also elaborates upon Brown's (1994) guidelines for grading listening materials.

- White (1998) presents a series of principles for activities in which learners progress through repeated listenings of texts. She indicates the need to focus listening instruction on 'what went wrong' when learners do not understand and the value of having instructional links between listening and speaking.

Another area of focus in the practice of teaching listening is learner training. Rubin (1994) and Mendelsohn and Rubin (1995) discuss the importance of strategy training in classroom teaching. Mendelsohn (1998) notes that commercially available materials increasingly include strategy training, particularly 'activation of schemata' prior to listening. Rost (1994) presents a framework for incorporating five types of listening strategies into classroom instruction: predicting, monitoring, inferencing, clarifying and responding.

Numerous published materials incorporate principles that have been gleaned from research and practice. Many coursebooks treat development of listening in interesting and innovative ways. Among them are *Headway* (Soars and Soars 1993), *New Interchange* (Richards *et al*. 1998) and *English Firsthand* (Helgesen *et al*. 1999).

Another aspect of listening pedagogy is the use of the target language for instruction. From simpler notions like 'teaching English through English' (J. Willis 1981), through teaching 'sheltered content' courses in the target language (Brinton *et al*. 1989) to full-scale immersion programmes (Genesee 1984), the benefits for learning content through listening are far-reaching. Not only do the learners have an ongoing demonstration of the importance of listening, but they also have continuous opportunities for integrating listening with other language and academic learning skills, and for using listening for authentic purposes. For a review of issues in assessment, see Brindley (1998b) and Chapter 20 of this volume.

Current and future trends and directions

LISTENING PEDAGOGY

One important trend is the study of individual learners' listening processes, both in specific tasks and longitudinally. Lynch (1996) provides insightful studies of individual listeners, particularly ones experiencing difficulties in making progress. He documents learner changes in product (how much the learner understands), process (the strategies the learner uses to gain understanding) and perception (how the learner views or experiences his or her own difficulties and progress). Similarly, Robbins (1997) tracks several ESL learners, observing how their listening strategies with native-speaker conversation partners develop over time.

The role of phonology in L2 listening is beginning to receive attention. Studies such as Kim (1995), Ross (1997) and Quinn (1998) examine spoken word and phrase recognition by L2 learners, in native speaker–non-native speaker interactions and in fixed-input tasks. Such studies

help show the kind of specific phonological strategies needed to adjust to an L2, and the kind of compensatory strategies needed when listeners experience gaps in input.

A promising area of SLA work that affects listening pedagogy is 'input enhancement' (R. Ellis 1994); this is the notion of marking or flooding listening input with the same set of grammatical, lexical or pragmatic features in order to facilitate students' noticing of those features. As the notion of 'awareness-triggering learning' takes hold, the role of listening instruction in this regard will become even more important.

Another trend is renewed interest in 'academic listening', or extended listening for specific purposes. An edited volume by Flowerdew (1994b) reviews several lines of research on lecturing styles, speech perception, text-structure analysis, note-taking and aural memory. As the information revolution progresses, the need for the 'traditional' skills of selective and evaluative listening will become more important.

LISTENING TECHNOLOGY

The widespread availability of audiotape, videotape, CD-ROMs, DVDs and internet downloads of sound and video files has vastly increased potential input material for language learning. Consequently, selection of the most appropriate input, chunking the input into manageable and useful segments, developing support material (particularly for self-access learning) and training of learners in the best uses of this input is ever more important (Benson and Voller 1997).

The development of computerised speech synthesis, speech enhancement and speech-recognition technology has also enabled learners to 'interact' with computers in ways that simulate human interaction. Here also, the use of intelligent methodology that helps students focus on key listening skills and strategies is vital so that 'use of the technology' is not falsely equated with instruction.

Conclusion

Listening has rightly assumed a central role in language learning. The skills underlying listening have become more clearly defined. Strategies contributing to effective listening are now better understood. Teaching methodology in the mainstream has not yet caught up with theory. In many language curriculums, listening is still often considered a mysterious 'black box', for which the best approach seems to be simply 'more practice'. Specific skill instruction as well as strategy development still need greater attention in order to demystify the listening process. Similarly, materials design lags behind current theory, particularly in the areas of input selection and strategy development. Also, the assessment of listening, especially, remains far behind current views of listening. Although there have been marked advances, still in many areas (e.g. curriculum design, teaching methodology, materials design, learner training and testing) much work remains to be done to modernise the teaching of listening.

Key readings

Bremer *et al*. (1996) *Discourse in Intercultural Encounters*
Brindley (1998b) Assessing listening abilities
Flowerdew (1994b) Research related to second language lecture comprehension
Mendelsohn and Rubin (1995) *A Guide for the Teaching of Second Language Listening*
Nunan (1995c) *New Ways in Teaching Listening*
Rost (1990) *Listening in Language Learning*
White (1998) *Listening*