PART I: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In Part I of this book, we present the main theoretical aspects that have traditionally been considered when discussing how learners develop listening skills. We begin in Chapter 1 by outlining the main approaches and methods that have been used over the past 70 years or so to teach English in general, and then we comment on how listening has, or has not, been accommodated in each approach and method.

In Chapter 2, we describe current psycholinguistic models of the listening process. Most approaches to teaching listening in the past have been influenced by three models – the so-called *bottom-up, top-down*, and *interactive* models. These models are still important, and we maintain that knowledge of how they operate is essential to understanding how an approach to the teaching of listening may be developed.

The main approaches to listening are influenced by our knowledge of the different types of meaning involved in understanding spoken text and how they affect the ways in which we listen to messages. These elements are reviewed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 takes the reader one stage deeper in the process of understanding the particular features of spoken text and how these features play a prominent role in any model that tries to account for how we listen. Attention is given to both monologue and, important for us, dialogue.

If learners are to develop skills in manipulating the features and elements of listening, they need to be aware of their specific learning styles and strategies and how these can affect the way they listen to spoken text. This is the theme of Chapter 5, the last chapter of Part I.

Each of the chapters in Part I forms an integral approach to the type of background knowledge that is important to consider if we wish to develop an integrated model of listening. This will be our task in the second part of the book.

1 *Approaches to Language Teaching and the Role of Listening*

1.1 Introduction

In this first chapter, we look at the main approaches that have been used to teach listening. These approaches have, to a large extent, followed the approaches to general syllabus design and teaching methodology. As these general approaches have changed over the past 50 years, so new methods for teaching listening have been advocated. Different approaches to listening can be seen by examining exercises and tasks in published material. Richards (1993:3) states that one view of how to improve teaching is through the use of instructional materials, so that "quality of teaching will come about through the use of instructional materials that are based on findings of current theory and research." Richards (ibid.) maintains that instructional materials can have a profound effect on teaching and that teachers rely on such materials to define the language courses they teach. He quotes one teacher who talked about some new materials she tried out: "This book has totally turned around the listening program in our school. We really didn't know what to do with listening before" (p. 6).

The approaches we discuss here are the grammar-translation approach, the direct-method approach, the grammar approach, the audio-lingual approach, the discrete-item approach, the communicative approach, the task-based approach, the learner-strategy approach, and the integrated approach. After introducing each approach, we identify the main learning goal with respect to listening. These learning goals are based on Morley (1995). Although some of these may not be considered bona fide approaches themselves, we consider them all to be "approaches" because they have influenced the ways in which language has been taught. Beginning in Section 1.4, we exemplify each approach to listening with an activity and then comment on the activity.

1.2 The Grammar-Translation Approach

Traditionally, listening was not taught in language classes. The first languages taught in modern classroom settings were Latin and Greek. The purpose of learning these languages was primarily to learn their grammars. The grammar-translation approach viewed language as a descriptive set of finite rules that, once learned, gave access to the language. A grammar-translation syllabus consisted of two components: grammar and lexical items. These were presented to the learner according to their perceived degree of difficulty. Richards and Rogers (2001:5–6) list the components that made up a grammar-translation syllabus. Stated briefly, these are the following:

1. The main goal of learning the language is to be able to read its literature.
2. Reading and writing are the main focus.
3. Vocabulary is taught through translation.
4. The method focuses on translating sentences into and out of the L2.
5. Accuracy is important, as all learning leads to an exam.
6. Grammar is taught deductively.
7. The L1 is the medium of instruction.

Learning goals related to listening: None.

Comment

Listening is not mentioned at all in the preceding description of the grammar-translation approach. The only listening that students would have to do would be to listen to a description of the rules of the second language (L2) in the first language (L1). As a result, if/when the L2 was used, the focus of any listening would have been on translation of lexical items or grammar structures. One reason for the lack of any real listening in the grammar-translation approach was that students were learning "dead" languages, languages that they would not have the opportunity to listen to, so the purpose in learning those languages was to be able to translate and read literature. Another reason was that the teachers of Latin and Greek had no training in how to teach listening. And in the early days of language teaching, there were no electronic means of recording.

1.3 The Direct-Method Approach

The direct-method approach to language teaching (also known as both the natural method and the conversational method) came about as a reaction

to the grammar-translation approach. Whereas the grammar-translation approach was organized around a step-by-step method of learning the rules of a language, often through the use of the first language, the direct-method approach was based on the idea that learners can best learn what is "natural" to them and that an aural/oral system of teaching them was appropriate for this purpose. This aural/oral method relied for its effectiveness on the use of monolingual teaching, that is, the L2 was the only language used in the class by the teacher and students.

The tenets of the direct-method approach are summarized by Richards and Rogers (2001) as follows:

1. Classroom instruction was conducted exclusively in the target language.
2. Only everyday vocabulary and sentences were taught.
3. Oral communication skills were built up in a carefully graded progression organized around question-and-answer exchanges between teachers and students in small, intensive classes.
4. Grammar was taught inductively.
5. New teaching points were introduced orally.
6. Concrete vocabulary was taught through demonstration, objects, and pictures; abstract vocabulary was taught through association of ideas.
7. Both speech and listening comprehension were taught.
8. Correct pronunciation and grammar were emphasized.

Gottlieb Heness and Lambert Sauveur were two of the first teachers to adopt the direct-method approach in their teaching in the late nineteenth century in the United States (see Howatt 1984). Heness and Sauveur opened a language school to teach German and French using a system similar to that described earlier. Although they did not use course books, Sauveur explains a typical lesson:

> Here is the finger. Look. Here is the forefinger, here is the middle finger, here is the ring-finger, here is the little finger, and here is the thumb. Do you see the finger, madame? Yes, you see the finger and I see the finger. Do you see the finger, monsieur? – Yes, I see the finger. – Do you see the forefinger, madame? – Yes, I see the forefinger. – And you monsieur? Etc.
>
> (Sauveur 1874, as cited in Howatt 1984:200)

The direct-method approach was adopted and made popular by Maximilian Berlitz (1852–1921). Berlitz founded a chain of language schools, prepared teaching materials, and had the native-speaker instructors in the schools use a direct-method approach in teaching the students. The idea behind what

was called the Berlitz method was that it was "simple, systematic, ordered, and replicable" (Howatt ibid.:206).

Learning goals related to listening: Listen and answer questions.

Comment

It appears that the direct-method approach truly focused on teaching listening skills first and other language skills later. However, in any review of early monolingual teaching methods, it seems that although the target language was used for all purposes in the classroom, there was no systematic attempt at *teaching* listening or at developing listening strategies in the learners. The teacher assumed that the students could hear what was being said and that comprehension would follow later – what Mendelson (1994) refers to as developing listening through "osmosis."

A second problem with this approach is that although it seemed to be effective at encouraging low-level language learners to make use of the target language, it was a difficult method to use above intermediate level because the complexities of the language became too challenging for the approach. For instance, as grammar always had to be learned inductively, learners wasted a lot of time trying to work out complex rules for themselves, and teachers who could speak the learners' L1 wasted time trying to convey abstract meaning using only the L2, when a simple translation would have been more efficient.

The direct method has had a significant effect on English language teaching over the past 100 years, and many of the methods that followed it contained some elements of the direct method, most notably the communicative method.

1.4 The Grammar Approach

The main idea of grammar-based listening exercises is to analyze the language by its components and reconstruct an incomplete text. By understanding the grammar of a language and the principles of how words are put together, or parsing (see Chapter 3), we can make sense of spoken text. Rost (1994:35) tells us that "[i]n order to understand utterances, we must know how words and phrases are bound to each other."

A grammar approach to listening usually has students look at a written text while they listen to a recording. This forces them to do several

things: identify words by their position in the sentence, work out the relationship between words and phrases, use forward and backward inferencing cues, and make intelligent guesses based on textual cues. This approach is often favored as a classroom approach to listening. The listening exercises are treated as purely classroom-based activities, which usually have little or no relevance to the outside world, and the tasks students are asked to perform have no real-life function. They are, however, popular as testing devices and are often used for this purpose (e.g., the international TOEFL test uses this method extensively in the listening section of the test).

Learning goals related to listening: To pattern match; to test listening.

Activity 1 – An Activity Illustrating the Grammar Approach

Listen to a medical doctor talk about staying healthy. While listening, fill in the missing words in the blank spaces below.

Getting and staying fit is important for _____. It does not matter how _____ or young you are; you can, and should, do things to _____ yourself fit and healthy. Some simple ways to get fit are _____ short distances instead of using a car or bus, cutting back on snacks like _____ or chips and instead eating fruit and vegetables, and taking up more active _____ instead of watching television every day. If we start _____ a healthy lifestyle, not only will we feel better, but there will be fewer visits to the _____. Once you begin to get fit, you will want to make more changes to your _____ and become more and more healthy.

Answers:

1. everybody	2. old	3. keep	4. walking	5. chocolate
6. hobbies	7. adopting	8. doctors	9. lifestyle	

Comment

In Activity 1, students must use words 1 to 9 to make grammatically correct sentences. In some cases, there is more than one correct answer. However, students must listen carefully to the recording to hear which missing word is used in each sentence. Such an exercise usually has no relationship to the exercises that precede or follow it. Consequently, each listening exercise is more of a *test* of listening ability than a means of developing specific

listening skills. Students can read Activity 1 and make intelligent guesses about the missing words without listening to the recording at all. But the exercise requires listening for specific vocabulary. There is no attempt to teach lexical meaning or to relate the text to anything other than the task at hand. Students do not even need to understand the words to complete the blanks in Activity 1; they need only recognize the sounds. Such activities are often found in listening books specially prepared for secondary school second language learners who are examination oriented. Because of their popularity in tests, grammar-based listening tasks have a substantial wash-back effect in the language class; that is, the format of the tests influences the approach to teaching.

Task 1

Look at Activity 1 and redesign the activity to make it more meaningful. Show your redesigned activity to a partner, and explain why you now think it is more meaningful.

1.5 The Audio-Lingual Approach

The audio-lingual approach to language learning was generated by the U.S. Defense Forces language programs during and after World War II. A number of factors influenced the way foreign languages were taught after the war (e.g., the emergence of several international languages, the greater mobility of people, and the expansion of education programs; see Stern 1983 for a more detailed description). To cater to these new needs for languages, the "Army Method" was developed in the United States. This method became known as the audio-lingual approach.

The audio-lingual approach to listening emphasizes first listening to pronunciation and grammatical forms and then imitating those forms by way of drills and exercises. In describing the audio-lingual approach, Richards and Rogers (2001:58) say that "the teaching of listening comprehension, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary are all related to development of aural fluency."

Dialogues and drills are the basis of classroom practice with this approach. Students are encouraged to listen carefully either to a taped recording of, or a teacher reading out, a dialogue or drill. They then record their

own version or respond to cues from the teacher to repeat parts of the dialogue or drill. The idea behind such a technique is that it helps the learner to create good habits. It is based on the idea of contrastive analysis, in which the material writer attempts to minimize interference from the students' L1.

Lado and Fries (1954) prepared a pronunciation textbook based on this approach (see Activity 2). The audio-lingual approach became a popular teaching method in the 1960s and early 1970s, when language laboratories were in fashion. The approach can still be found, in different guises, in many current classroom textbooks.

Learning goals related to listening: To pattern match; to listen, imitate, and memorize.

Activity 2 – An Activity Illustrating the Audio-Lingual Approach

Practice the following sentences. Remember that the tongue does not contact or vibrate against the tooth ridge or palate when you pronounce [r] correctly.

What is he reading?	He's reading a book.
What is she reading?	She's reading a book.
What are they reading?	They're reading a book.
What are you reading?	I'm reading a book.
What is he writing?	He's writing some letters.
What is she writing?	She's writing some letters.
What are they writing?	They're writing some letters.
What are you writing?	I'm writing some letters.
What is he wearing?	He's wearing a green suit.
What is she wearing?	She's wearing a green suit.
What are they wearing?	They're wearing green suits.
What are you wearing?	I'm wearing a green suit.
Where is he?	He's in the garden.
Where is she?	She's in the garden.
Where are they?	They're in the garden.

English Pronunciation, by R. Lado and C. C. Fries, 1958. Reproduced by permission of The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

Comment

The approach to teaching exemplified in Activity 2 is based on the stimulus-response theory of the American school of behaviorist psychology (see Skinner 1957). Basically, the more the students repeat a "correct" phrase/sentence, the stronger their memory of the structure will be. Therefore, students must listen and repeat similar words and sentence structures many times in order to remember them. If a student makes an incorrect response, the teacher corrects the student before continuing with the exercise. The drill pattern in Activity 2 could be extended into a two-phase conversation between students:

S1: What's he reading?
S2: He's reading a book.

But it is difficult to see the dialogue extending beyond this two-phase pattern. Because there is no attempt to teach lexis or contextualize the sentences, developing listening skills is not the main focus of the audio-lingual approach; the manipulation of structures is.

Task 2
Design for elementary students a listening worksheet that uses an audio-lingual approach to teach the simple past tense.

1.6 The Discrete-Item Approach

The audio-lingual approach led to what may be called the discrete-item approach in teaching. Whereas the audio-lingual approach focuses on drilling with the intent of "understanding" grammar, a discrete-item approach deals with the *segmental* and *suprasegmental* aspects of spoken text and their contextualization. Segmentals are the individual vowel and consonant sounds. Suprasegmentals are, for example, stress and tone. A discrete-item-based approach deals with these features of speech in a highly structured way. Often sounds and features of spoken text are presented and drilled. They are then compared and contrasted with other sounds in the language as a way of trying to familiarize students with the sounds. Ur (1994) points out that many students have difficulty hearing sounds in English because these sounds may not exist in their own language (see Chapter 3). Therefore, it is "essential for the learner to achieve familiarity with the common phonemes

of the target language as soon as possible if he is to be an efficient listener" (Ur 1994:12). This might suggest that a discrete-item approach should be used only at the beginning of a course and then forgotten about. Experience shows, however, that these discrimination problems persist right up to advanced levels.

It is possible, by understanding the students' first languages, to make predictions about what features of the target language they will have difficulty hearing or discriminating. For example, Japanese students have difficulty distinguishing between /v/ and /w/ and between /ɪ/ and /i:/, French students have difficulty with /e/ and /eɪ/ and with /θ/ and /ð/, and many nonnative English students have difficulty identifying *-ed* past tense endings. By knowing what sounds students will have the most difficulty with, teachers are able to customize the type of listening exercises to which their students are exposed. The types of exercises that help students practice listening to the sounds of the language are isolation-type listening tasks. That is, processing is done on a discrete-item basis. This type of listening enables students to listen for helpful cues in the text.

Learning goals related to listening: To process discrete-point information.

Activity 3 – An Activity Illustrating the Discrete-Item Approach

There are different ways to pronounce -ed *endings of regular past tense verbs. Listen to the following words and put them in the correct column.*

asked	**followed**	**started**	**jumped**	**accepted**
finished	**lived**	**looked**	**called**	**invited**

/t/	**/d/**	**/ɪd/**
. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .
. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .
. . . . .	. . . . .	. . . . .

Comment

In Activity 3 students focus on the difference in past tense endings. This kind of activity can be found in a popular course for students called *Headway* (Cunningham and Bowler 1990), where it is usually part of larger work units on segmentals. While listening to a recording of the list of words, students arrange the words in boxes according to the sound /t/, /d/, or /ɪd/. After they have done this, they can check their answers with a key at