

Learning to Teach Listening: Students' and Teachers' Perceptions

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Our students often complain about their listening: 'teacher, why are they talking so fast?'; 'I don't understand this guy's accent!' and so on. Therefore, we should try to help them by diagnosing their listening problems and improving their listening skills.

This matters greatly not only because listening skills represent an underdeveloped area of research compared to the other three skills, but also because of the historical moment in which we now are: English is becoming more and more important and our students are realising how much they need to comprehend it for purposes related to examinations, the youth culture (i.e. songs and films) and employment opportunities. This provides them with great motivation, that we can use to our and their advantage. It is also important because we need to address the question: are we teaching listening or are we just testing it?

1. Theoretical concepts

American psychologist John R. Anderson (1995) elaborated a framework to explain the processes involved in listening. It involves the three stages of perception, parsing and utilization. These three phases can overlap and breakdowns can happen at any of these stages. It is also important that as practitioners, we keep in mind that our students have both *bottom-up* and *top-down* skills: they comprehend in a hierarchical way in the first (starting from the sounds and combining them into words and sentences) and make inferences and predictions on potential meaning in the latter. We need to integrate the two for successful listening.

As regards the structure of listening activities, we need to bear in mind that stages are necessary, including but not limited to a pre-listening phase with schemata-building activities, guiding tasks for the listening phase, and a post-listening open phase in which the students can use what they've learnt in speaking and relate it to real-life.

2. Research on students' and teachers' perceptions

My research was based on the perceptions of 121 students and five teachers from secondary schools in and around the Milan area. The main themes were the appreciation for listening activities, the materials and sources, the perceived importance of the skill and the perceived difficulties in listening.

While a high level of appreciation for listening activities was shown by the students, they reported having some prominent perception and parsing problems. Although the teachers involved showed good awareness of their students' problems with listening, the results of the research seem to point at one more question that we as practitioners should ask ourselves: is teacher talk time a valid replacement for listening activities? How much do we sacrifice listening instruction in our classes?

3. Improving our students' listening skills

Two main findings emerged from the research that can in fact help and motivate us to improve our teaching of listening skills in practice: students seem to like listening activities and they also seem to be aware of the importance of listening skills. In other words, if they are motivated to improve their listening skills, this should be all the more reason for us to support them appropriately.

One of the many ways in which we can use listening is for diagnostic purposes: in other words, we need to be aware of which mistakes our students make and where they originate. What often happens is that when breakdowns in comprehension happen to our students, we briefly explain that "one word they did not catch" and assume that the problem is solved. Problems with listening, however, are rooted far more deeply in the students' lack of bottom-up and top-down skills: we need to become able to identify such problems and work toward fixing them.

We can do this by working on bottom-up and top-down processing. As for bottom-up processing, breakdowns in comprehension can occur due to a number of reasons on different levels. Some examples are:

- lexical segmentation (that is, boundaries between words in a stream of speech)
- the word may not be present in the student's listening vocabulary, while it might be in the reading vocabulary
- weak forms or phonological variations of a word are used (i.e. in the Beatles song "Hey Jude", the word *her* is only pronounced like /ə/ in "remember to let her into your heart", so the students may understand "letter" or "leather")
- collocations are heard that are unknown and difficult to predict

How do we improve this? We can work on bottom-up skills in a number of ways: for example, by teaching phonetics and sounds, focussing on the differences between pronunciation and spelling, working on intonation, using dictation and focussing on the same chunk of a listening more than once to encourage reflection.

While this work is certainly important, it cannot suffice to prepare our students for when they need to listen for meaning (Goh, 2000). That is the reason why we also need to develop their top-down skills. We can do this in a several ways, such as getting them to pay attention to discourse markers, visuals, body language, pauses and tones; getting them to infer missing or unfamiliar words from context or trying to complete a sentence based on prior knowledge.

4. Listening instruction: do's and dont's

When you teach listening, do:

- ✓ provide the students with a purpose for listening, or they will lose focus
- ✓ introduce activities (such as brainstorming) to build background knowledge
- ✓ relate the contents of the listening activity to real life
- ✓ Play the recording or video more than once
- ✓ Encourage students to listen outside of the classroom
- ✓ Use the same text more than once with different purposes to develop different listening strategies
- ✓ Give students an active role: for example, creating a set of questions or responding to a dialogue
- ✓ Establish a clear structure and enable final speaking

- ✓ Use internet sources and diversify your materials

When you teach listening, remember to try avoiding the following:

- Use recordings or videos that are too long
- Overstress the pre-teaching of vocabulary, as the students may focus on those to the detriment of meaning
- Take good answers to listening tests as signs of successful comprehension: different students can get to the very same answer by employing different strategies and understanding significantly different portions of a text
- Forget to give the students enough time to familiarise themselves with the tasks you set

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