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EDITORIAL:
A SPECIAL ISSUE ON SECOND AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LISTENING PEDAGOGY AND ASSESSMENT

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Research into second language (L2) listening is alive and well. A survey of recent journal issues shows an encouragingly good number of articles on the topic of L2 listening. However, the number of special issues on L2 listening in recent years is still relatively small. This special issue on L2 listening by IJIELTR shows the commitment of a young journal to signaling the importance of listening to its publication agenda. It is also a statement of the need to provide a sustained focus on a topic that is so critical to L2 learning and development. Unlike some special issues that aim to attract mainly well-known authors in a field, this IJIELTR special issue is unique in that it showcases the work of relatively new scholars. The authors represent the continual strong interest in listening research and pedagogy in countries such as Japan and the USA, and the strengthening of this interest in countries such as China and Singapore. Just as importantly, the articles in this special collection demonstrate the diversity of scholarly interest in L2 listening and the ideas embodied in each one can contribute to the advancement of a sustained research and pedagogy agenda for L2 listening.

Seven articles have been selected for this special issue, each having undergone blind reviews by expert readers before being further reviewed by the editors of this special issue. Two articles report classroom-based studies on listening instruction; one focuses on the effects of test language on listening performance while another examines lexical activation in bottom-up processes. Three articles focus on descriptions of pedagogical procedures that the authors have themselves successfully carried out. These pedagogically-oriented articles do not merely describe good practices, but the discussion of each pedagogical set is based on data collected from the classrooms, thus making each pedagogical recommendation evidence-informed.

In the first article, Siegel examined the types of advice in listening instruction that EFL lecturers in Japan gave their students and the extent to which such advice had been linked to specific classroom listening activities or was directed at listening experiences beyond the L2 classroom. Advice aimed at helping students in real life listening beyond the classroom was

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seen to have high transferability and generalizability and was particularly helpful for listening development. Such advice was found to occur more frequently in the classrooms compared to advice with low transferability or text/task-bound advice. By text/task-bound advice, Siegel meant advice that teachers offered on how to tackle specific problems in a text or task. In the following article, Zeng examined the effectiveness of metacognitive instruction in helping Chinese college EFL learners improve listening performance and metacognitive awareness. Over 5 weeks of instruction, he compared students who were taught using a metacognitive instruction approach with those who received traditional listening instruction. The metacognitive instruction group experienced a weekly sequence of individual self-reflection, group discussions and teacher-led awareness-raising of five factors: person knowledge, planning and evaluation, mental translation, directed attention, and problem-solving. Although both groups showed significant improvement at the end of the instruction, an independent t-test revealed that learners in the metacognitive instruction group achieved greater progress. An increase in confidence was also revealed through the qualitative comments derived from the learners’ post-intervention reflections. In the next article, Hamrick and Pandža set out to examine competitive lexical activation during spoken word recognition by Arabic learners of ESL using a variant of the gating task. Learners were played a fragment of a list of words and asked to indicate the word they believed they were hearing. The authors report that participants consistently produced higher frequency words and from denser phonological neighborhoods than the target words they were hearing. These factors were known to affect the speed and accuracy of L1 and L2 spoken word recognition, and this study provides fine-grained data that reveals the extent of this influence on one group of L2 listeners.

The fourth article is by LaClare, Roger, and Rowberry. It turns our attention from listening instruction to the issue of construct validity in listening tests. Students were divided into two language proficiency levels and Japanese (L1) and English (L2) multiple choice questions were used. The authors found that both the language medium of the test items and language proficiency have a significant impact on listening comprehension test scores. This study builds on earlier insights that questioned the construct validity of MC items, which purportedly are less time-consuming for test-takers to complete and for testers to mark, minimize production skills that may interfere with listening, and are suitable for large scale tests (Thompson, 1995). However, if MC items are written in the L2, then L2 reading skill is required to complete the task, which implies that construct-irrelevant ability is involved in the listening test. To avoid reading skills being involved in a listening test, effort has been made to improve construct validity. For example, Chang and Read (2013) looked at presenting MC items in an oral mode compared to the traditional way of presenting MC questions in written mode. They found that although oral MC questions do not involve reading skills, this approach is more cognitively demanding, e.g., to hold the options in short-term memory. If all the test-takers share the same L1, then MC questions may be presented in the L1. This might be an alternative approach to avoid L2 reading ability being confounded in L2 listening tests and reduce short-term memory demand, as was done in the study by LaClare and colleagues.

In the next two articles, the authors explored a similar theme of using authentic materials for developing listening. Ducker and Saunders discussed the benefits of extensive listening by describing a language program in Japan where learners have the chance to go through various stages of increasing autonomy in selecting and completing extensive listening tasks. They
recorded the difficulties that students reported in carrying out the tasks. Based on this information, the teachers gave students advice to make the activities more accessible and beneficial for their listening development. Such advice may be described as the text/task-bound advice that Siegel discussed in the article that begins this volume. Elk describes a set of classroom procedures that make use of TED talks in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program in the US. The procedures were aimed at low-intermediate proficiency learners and helped them to develop better understanding of their listening errors by writing reflections on mishearings or misunderstandings and why they occurred. The goal of Elk’s recommendations is to assist learners with developing greater awareness of lexical segmentation in natural spoken texts; hence, supporting their bottom-up processing skills. Elk also gives a list of TED talks that she considers suitable for learners who need to develop their abilities to listen to authentic language in lecture-style spoken discourse.

The theme of metacognitive awareness in Zeng’s article is also developed by Kaur in the final article on teaching listening to young learners in Singapore. Before describing a series of pedagogical procedures, Kaur presented data from the self-report of a group of young learners. She shows that young learners were able to reflect on their own understanding of listening and offers several strategies for teaching listening through a metacognitive instruction approach that capitalizes on young learners’ metacognition as opposed to the product-oriented approach typically found in many classrooms. In this final article in the collection, Kaur reiterates the importance of helping learners understand the processes of listening and themselves as listeners. Such process-based (rather than content-focused) discussions, Kaur argues, can help English language learners’ increase their confidence and ultimately improve their listening.

This volume will provide readers with insights into different lines of research and good evidence-driven practices for listening instruction. As a further contribution to the discussion on current thinking in the field of listening research and pedagogy, two of the editors of this special issue have also offered their perspectives on ideas they see as promising or critical to further understanding of the development of the field. Let us consider these views:

**PODCASTS AND AUTONOMOUS LISTENING DEVELOPMENT:**

**KEY PRINCIPLES**

(Jeremy Cross)

Recently, a small number of articles (see Alm, 2013; Cross, 2014; Hawke, 2010; Yeh, 2013) have been published regarding the use of podcasts, which are defined here as “a multimedia file distributed over the Internet using syndication feeds, for playback on mobile devices and personal computers” (Kidd and Chen, 2009, p. 364), as a means for learners to independently develop their L2 listening skills outside the classroom, be it at home, in self-access centres, or on the move. Drawing on these articles, it is possible to propose a number of key principles, which can inform both classroom and research practice.

A first principle is that learners should be given suggestions and advice about which audio or audiovisual podcasts constitute appropriate listening material. This appropriacy will depend upon the extent to which a podcast caters to the learners’ personal interests, course
requirements, and level of listening ability, the provision of transcripts, and the degree to which it is readily available and accessible, representative of L2 social, cultural, and linguistic contexts, and amenable to the use of metatechnical skills (i.e., skills for controlling a media device) for self-paced listening (Cross, 2014a; Hawke, 2010). Moreover, Cross (2014a) points to the need to initially cultivate L2 listeners' metatextual skills, i.e., knowledge of the structural and functional properties of texts and related learning activities and the application of this knowledge in task completion (Bull and Anstey, 2010; Rouet and Eme, 2002), to enable them to recognize the various features of texts, such as culturally-specific conventions of construction and production, and be able to manipulate texts effectively to maximize self-directed listening practice. Furthermore, allied to the previous principle, it is important to provide early guidance to learners regarding an appropriate cycle of listening tasks which covers both bottom-up and top-down skills and encompasses transcript analysis following several phases of listening, as with the 9-step podcast task sequence introduced by Cross (2014b) or Hawke's (2010) 7-step sequence. Once, it is apparent that learners have gained the ability to employ a suitable task cycle for using podcasts by themselves, the provision of support can correspondingly be minimized to 'push' learners towards independent control of their listening learning. Another key principle is that the consistent completion of listening journals by learners from the outset, whether in the form of blogs (Alm, 2013) or diaries (Cross, 2014a; Yeh, 2013), is critical in providing a medium for them to organize, report, and reflect on their podcast listening activities and self-evaluate their performance. Listening journals also provide teachers and researchers with a useful means of monitoring learners' podcast selection, use, and metatextual and L2 listening skill development.

In summary, the studies by Alm (2013), Cross (2014a), Hawke (2010), and Yeh (2013) provide early insights into and understanding of utilising podcasts for promoting self-directed listening learning. It is an aspect of listening comprehension that offers noteworthy developmental potential beyond the classroom, and there is certainly ample scope for L2 listening researchers to contribute to consolidating an associated theory and pedagogy.

**FOCUS ON BOTTOM-UP PROCESSING DIFFICULTIES**

(Steven Brown)

Descriptions of teaching listening over the years have maintained the need for an interactive balance between top-down and bottom-up listening. Using top-down processing, listeners use their knowledge of the world, their experiences, and knowledge of the context in which the input is produced to arrive at understanding. Using bottom-up processing, learners assemble meaning by understanding individual sounds, words, and sentences. The two processes interact to allow listeners to arrive at meaning. In reality, most communicative classrooms have focused on top-down processes. The classic structure of a listening lesson has been: activate prior knowledge, listen to a series of short passages, and check students’ answers. This is what has been characterized as the “comprehension approach.” This approach has indeed been successful pedagogy for some students, but many researchers have criticized it as more testing than teaching. Additionally, Richards (2005, p. 87) has noted that we have largely ignored bottom-up activities, “which require accurate recognition and recall
of words, syntax and expression that occurred in the input.” He maintains that a focus on these sorts of activities, added to the comprehension approach, would result in “listening as acquisition.”

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in bottom-up processing, led in part by the work of Field (2008). This is entirely appropriate because it is true that many of the reported difficulties learners have with listening are bottom-up issues. Studies of difficulties that learners have with listening have named the following largely bottom-up factors, among others: phonological processes (stress, deleted sounds, merged sounds, strong and weak forms), word recognition, segmenting speech, and failure to recognize the main idea or develop a usable ongoing representation of the input (See Brown 2011, pp. 35-83 for a summary of difficulties).

What can be done to help learners practice effective use of bottom-up processes? Word recognition relies on the ability to segment the speech stream into recognizable words. Working with stress and intonation can help this understanding. Languages often stress words in reliable patterns; the majority of English words are stressed on the first syllable, for example. Information-carrying words are stressed within sentences. Learners also must be able to put words into thought groups and to recognize reduced speech (wanna for want to). In other words, a closer relationship between listening and pronunciation work (most often thought of as more appropriate for speaking) is indicated. Work with transcripts of listening passages in which learners indicate word/sentence stress and thought groups is another possibility.

Word recognition is a major problem for listening. In Goh (2000), three of the top ten problems that Chinese learners of English had were word-related: students failed to recognize known words, got stuck on unknown words (and missed the rest of the message) or had trouble segmenting the input into words. A major problem is that students have often been taught vocabulary words in reading classes, where the focus is on recognition, and not comprehension. Students frequently may have no idea how the words sound when spoken. They might have heard the word a few times, but most practice has been written, and not oral.

English language teaching has a bad habit of throwing out the baby with the bath water. We should not abandon the interactive approach for an exclusive focus on bottom-up processing. Indeed, bottom-up processing is sometimes the refuge of poor listeners (Tsui and Fullilove, 1998). However, students might benefit from increased practice with the skills involved in bottom-up processing.

**Final Remarks**

Although the research agenda for listening has been well established over the past 30 years or so (see Miller, 2014), approaches to teaching or developing sophisticated listening skills and strategies in second language learners is still not a top priority for teachers. This is strange seeing as listening is the language skill we use most in our everyday communication (Vandegrift, 1999), and it is the predominant skill students need when studying at university. Thirty years ago, Gilman and Moody (1984) identified three reasons why L2 listening was not taken seriously: firstly, speaking was generally was more highly prized than demonstrating the ability to be a good listener; secondly, teachers believed that listening was
a skill which could be ‘picked up’, and thirdly, most teachers were unaware that the skill actually did need to be taught as they had never been shown how to develop their own listening skills. The situation has not changed much in the 21st Century classroom. Teachers still count on textbooks which adopt a testing approach to listening whereby learners are required to listen to scripted texts and then answer questions, and this relies more on memory than on any other skill. There has been an attempt with some recent textbooks to introduce more authentic types of listening. For example, DVDs are now used to show kinesics features; spoken texts sometimes have features like hedging or repetitions in them, and there is a growing amount of online self-access material for learners to use.

Listening is a complex process and one which needs to be developed so that L2 learners can interact in the global world. Among the skills they need to master are: the ability to comprehend phonology and lexis, speech rates, and foreign accents; the identification of discourse markers and lexical phrases; the effect of kinesics; the identification of metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies; and the need to develop an ability for critical listening, intertextuality referencing, and contextualization. Given such an array of features and dimensions, it is not enough to allow listening skills to be ‘picked up’ and we need to make a greater effort to integrate the teaching of listening with the other, more prized, language skills of reading, writing, and speaking.

When we consider the papers published in this volume and the views that the editors have expressed, we can certainly see that the field of teaching and learning L2 listening is vibrant and rich in possibilities. Researchers and practitioners can revisit old agendas through new research tools and lenses, harness the power and appeal of new technology and evaluate the way listening is taught so as to engage learners through principled approaches that are based on theory and empirical evidence. It is our hope therefore that this special issue will trigger new ways of examining how L2 listening is developed in and outside the classroom and stimulate further interest in the teaching and research of L2 listening.

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