
Title	Learning to listen
Author(s)	Christine Goh C. M
Source	<i>REACT</i> , 1999(2), 44-53
Published by	National Institute of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

Review by Christine C. M. Goh

INTRODUCTION

Listening is the most frequently used communication skill. Studies have shown that we spend at least 40% of our communication time engaged in listening, and the rest of the time speaking, reading and writing (Wolvin and Coakely, 1996). Listening has long been a means of learning in tertiary education where lectures, seminars and tutorials are still the most common modes for the delivery of content and the exchange of ideas. It is just as important for pupils in schools. Consider the amount of time pupils spend listening to their teachers each day, and you can appreciate the need to help pupils develop good listening skills and habits in English. More importantly, as co-operative learning makes advances in classrooms, listening to one another becomes another important way of learning for pupils in both primary and secondary schools.

Nobody will deny that listening and speaking should play a key role in an individual's learning process. However, when it comes to teaching, speaking appears to take precedence over listening in the classroom. Pupils are always encouraged to 'speak up' in class, particularly during group work, in order to demonstrate understanding and contribute ideas. They are seldom taught or encouraged to listen actively and purposefully. Active listening is a skill which can help pupils learn through working cohesively in a group, by finding out what others know and helping one another develop and reshape ideas. More

specifically, effective listening skills can help teachers achieve some of the MOE's desired outcomes of education for Singapore pupils, namely, think for and express themselves; work in teams and value every contribution; think independently and creatively; seek, process and apply knowledge.

Good listening skills are not only crucial to formal and informal learning, they are also the cornerstones for building good interpersonal relationships at work and in social situations. How many times have we heard ourselves or others bemoaning the fact that students or colleagues 'just don't listen'? Increasingly, however, people have begun to realise that listening is a special skill that has to be developed and that not everyone who speaks a language fluently is necessarily a good listener. Good listening skills are a valued quality. This is acknowledged by a number of well-known service-related establishments that advertise good listening skills as a distinctive feature of their employees. The number of personal development books and commercial courses that teach effective listening is further evidence of the realisation that listening is a vital but much neglected communication skill.

In spite of the growing recognition of listening as a key communication skill, it is the skill that receives the least instruction time in Singapore schools. In terms of research, it is also the least studied of all the four language learning skills. This phenomenon is not particular to Singapore.

For a long time, teachers everywhere used to think that listening was a skill one developed naturally. It was assumed that everybody who could speak a language would naturally know how to listen. Foreign and second language teachers also believed that language learners' listening would automatically improve with greater exposure to the target language.

Pupils cannot learn to listen in a vacuum. One of the ways by which good listening skills and habits can be developed is through the use of well-planned and meaningful communicative oral skill tasks in language classes. The aim of this article is to provide a brief review of theoretical discussions and research in the field of listening that can inform its teaching. The first part gives an overview of the developments in the field of language teaching that have led to a change in the status of listening. This is followed by theoretical views and research findings that show listening ability as the product of complex mental processes, which are in turn influenced by both internal and external factors. Some similarities of first language (L1) and second language (L2) listening comprehension are also compared. The article ends with some practical implications for the language classroom. Although the works selected focus mainly on listening to English, the same pedagogical principles can be applied to the teaching of Tamil, Malay and Chinese.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Developments in the field of language teaching

It is only in the the last two decades that listening has featured prominently in the field of language learning and research.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, listening was increasingly accepted as a key to language acquisition. There was growing evidence in second language acquisition studies which supported the claim that listening comprehension coupled with delayed oral production or a silent period could facilitate language acquisition (e.g. Postovsky, 1974). Many theories of second language acquisition had also begun to formally recognise the important role of comprehension, particularly listening comprehension, in language acquisition and learning. Two such examples were Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis and the information processing model (McLaughlin, Rossman and McLeod, 1983). These acquisition theories highlighted the importance of listening in learning another language, especially during the early stages of the process.

The second reason was the direct result of developments in Europe in the seventies. In order to ensure that Europeans can communicate effectively with one another, the Council of Europe set out to improve the teaching of foreign languages. The Council proposed separate needs analyses for each of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and established a model of the communicative needs of the archetypal adult foreign language learner. It also recommended separate skill syllabuses. The phenomenal success and influence of the communicative approach engendered intense discussions about innovative methods for teaching language for effective communication. Guidelines on selecting materials, designing tasks and developing lessons to help learners practise the four language skills in authentic or simulated communication were offered (Johnson and Morrow, 1981). An important outcome of

all this was that listening was finally recognised as an important communication skill that merited special treatment in the language classroom. These developments in Europe were to have immense influence on language curriculums and teaching methodology in many parts of the world, including Singapore.

Theoretical views on listening

Listening is a complex ability. It involves more than understanding what words mean. Communication scholars Wolvin and Coakley (1996) identified five types of purposeful listening.

- *Discriminative* - listening to distinguish auditory and/ or visual stimuli. It is basic to all listening purposes.
- *Comprehensive* - listening to understand the message. It forms the foundation for listening therapeutically, critically and appreciatively.
- *Therapeutic* - listening to provide someone with the opportunity to talk through a problem.
- *Critical* - listening to evaluate the message.
- *Appreciative* - listening to obtain enjoyment through the works and experiences of others.

Language teaching has traditionally been concerned with listening to discriminate sounds and to comprehend. The focus has been on recognising phonemic differences, listening for details and listening for gist.

Between the 1940s and 1960s, the dominant view of listening comprehension was the

“bottom-up” approach, which assumed that comprehension was built up step-by-step from phonetic sounds and syntax. This was also called the “text-driven” view of comprehension. In the seventies, however, attention shifted to a “top-down” approach, which postulated that listeners interacted with the text and the context and brought with them prior knowledge to arrive at a reasonable interpretation of the meaning. This approach was also described as being “knowledge-driven”. This remarkable shift in focus can be attributed to the influence of the work of cognitive psychologists who investigated the way different types of knowledge were represented in our memory and how these were retrieved to assist our understanding of new situations or unfamiliar texts. Central to this concept of knowledge representation is the role of “schemata” (Bartlett, 1932, Rumelhart, 1980), which are defined as coherent collections of knowledge concerning a type of event, situation, or object in top-down processes.

In the field of applied linguistics, there was an attempt by Widdowson (1978) to distinguish between ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’ abilities. ‘Hearing’ referred to an individual’s ability to recognise words, parse sentences and arrive at an understanding of the message. ‘Listening’, on the other hand, was the ability to relate what was understood to what had been said. More importantly, it included the ability to recognise the communicative function of an utterance in a specified context. It consisted of hearing the words and decoding the literal meaning of a message, accompanied by an interpretation of its intent. In brief, listening required both bottom-up and top-down processing.

This view of listening as an active meaning-

construction process was also expressed by Anderson and Lynch (1988, p.6): *"the listener has a crucial part to play in the process, by activating various types of knowledge, and by applying what he (sic.) knows to what he (sic.) hears and trying to understand what the speaker means"*. These two descriptions of listening encapsulate the widely accepted constructive view of listening in current language teaching. This view was instrumental in creating the familiar three-phase listening lesson (pre-listening, while-listening, post-listening). This lesson structure, particularly the pre-listening phase, contributed much to the development of purposeful listening in the classroom.

One of the most comprehensive descriptions of listening in language learning to date was offered by Rost (1990, pps 33 & 62)

"Understanding spoken language is essentially an inferential process based on a perception of cues rather than a straightforward matching of sound to meaning. The listener must find relevant links between what is heard (and seen) and those aspects of context that might motivate the speaker to make a particular utterance at a particular time. ... It is important to emphasize the principle of meaning as active knowledge construction, rather than a passive reception of information. Meaning in discourse is created by the listener within a personal knowledge domain. Meaning is created only by an active listening in which the linguistic form triggers interpretation within the listener's background and in relation to the listener's purpose, rather than conveying information".

Rost highlighted inferencing as the key cognitive process during listening. He made a distinction between 'low-level' inferences and 'high-level' inferences. Low-level inferences draw upon an individual's knowledge of the sounds and intonation features of the target language to perceive the words that a speaker is saying. These are 'speech decoding skills'. High-level inferences, on the other hand, draw on an individual's prior knowledge or schemata to interpret the meaning of the words heard.

According to cognitive psychologist J. R. Anderson (1985), comprehension processes do not happen in a linear manner. He postulates three phases of comprehension which overlap and are recursive - perception, parsing and utilisation. In the case of competent users of a language, the perception and parsing phases will be almost if not fully automatised. This means that they are able to instantly recognise the sounds they hear as distinct words and at the same time build a basic mental model of the meaning of these utterances. This allows the listeners more time and cognitive capacity to process the input on a higher knowledge-driven level, which requires them to draw inferences and use the information that has been processed.

Factors affecting learner listening

A recent survey on learner listening research found that there were no fewer than 80 studies that examined external and internal factors which enhanced or depressed listening comprehension (Rubin, 1994). These can be summarised into five categories: text type, task, interlocutor, process and listener. Although these factors were isolated by researchers, it has been

shown that many language learners were actually themselves quite aware of the influence some of these factors had on their comprehension (Goh, 1997).

Research that examined listening processes has been successful at deducing the dynamic mental activities involved in second language listening comprehension through an examination of listening strategies. Many of these studies were carried out only as recently as the last ten years (see for example, O'Malley, Chamot & Küpper 1989; Bacon, 1992; Vogely, 1995; Young, 1997; Goh, 1998a). Earlier studies specifically examined the role of top-down and bottom-up processes in learner listening (Conrad, 1985, Wolf, 1987). There is also now a small body of research that examines the effects of training learners to apply strategies for listening comprehension (see for example, Thompson & Rubin, 1993 cited in Chamot 1995, and Chamot, Robbins & El-Dinary, 1993). The results for strategy training have so far been mainly inconclusive.

Listener characteristics, particularly gender and proficiency, have been another popular topic of research. As a factor of comprehension, listener characteristics have been closely linked to the study of the types of cognitive processing observed during listening. Young's (1997) study showed that female learners demonstrated a greater tendency to use metacognitive strategies such as selective attention and monitoring for managing their listening. They also used more social-affective strategies to get help when comprehension was not forthcoming. Bacon (1992) also found that female learners tended to use more metacognitive strategies compared with their male counterparts, who resorted to cognitive strategies more frequently.

High proficiency learners in almost all studies used a wider range of strategies and showed evidence of both top-down and bottom-up processing (see for example, O'Malley et. al 1989, Goh, 1998b). Conrad's study (1985) reported that low ability learners engaged more frequently in bottom-up processing and failed to use semantic clues to process information top-down, but other studies have shown that low-ability listeners made good use of their prior knowledge in top-down processing whenever possible (Wolf, 1987, Goh, 1998b).

A comparison of first and second language listening comprehension

O'Malley, Chamot and Küpper (1989) investigated whether there was a correspondence between the listening processes of L1 and L2 language listeners. Anderson's (1985) three-phase model of L1 comprehension was chosen as a baseline for comparing second language listening. They reported that the mental processes of the ESL students in their study paralleled the three phases of Anderson's model – perception, parsing, and utilisation. The study identified a number of strategies that were used during these comprehension phases. During the perceptual processing phase, students reported using selective attention, that is, ignoring irrelevant distractors and maintaining attention during the task. They also monitored themselves by checking their attentiveness and comprehension. Parsing strategies included grouping, or listening for larger chunks, such as paying attention to intonation. Inferencing and elaboration were also identified. The students used information in the text and their own knowledge to infer meaning or to complete missing ideas. They also reported elaborating their

interpretations by drawing on prior knowledge.

The findings of O'Malley et al. (1989) supported similarities between L1 and L2 comprehension processes. Other L2 researchers have argued the same, but they have also stressed that there would be some differences in the way these processes were applied and also in the types of difficulties that language learners experienced (Færch & Kasper, 1986). Goh's (1998b) study on strategic processing also showed many similarities between L1 and L2 comprehension. First of all, like L1 users, the language learners studied made use of linguistic and communicative input, stored knowledge and contextual information for their comprehension. As with L1 comprehension, gaps regularly occurred. There was evidence from the language learners' processing tactics to indicate that inferencing was a key strategy for bridging such gaps. The primary reason for these gaps was, nevertheless, predictably different from that responsible for gaps occurring in L1 comprehension which were normally due to inattentiveness, biases, or a lack of prior knowledge. Gaps in learners' comprehension were mainly due to imperfect knowledge of the target language and fixation on problematic parts, both of which directly affected perception and parsing of linguistic input.

CONCLUSION

Successful listening requires both low-level and high-level processing skills. It is the ability to engage in high-level processing that enables the use of more sophisticated listening skills such as critical, therapeutic and appreciative listening. Pupils who are not proficient in English will undoubtedly face many challenges. They will need help in improving their low-level listening skills

so that they can engage in high-level, top-down processing. In this way, they will be able to expand their listening skills to go beyond mere comprehension of facts and enjoy the benefits of good listening ability outlined in this article. At the same time, pupils who are already proficient in English should be challenged further to develop good listening skills and habits.

Listening is undoubtedly a life skill. Some experts call it a critical enabling skill. Good listening skills will not only help pupils function effectively in their studies and future employment, but also enhance their ability to develop good interpersonal relationships in and out of school. The current proliferation of electronic media has further strengthened the role of listening in English as an essential part of communication. In addition, with globalisation and regionalisation on the increase, there is an even more pressing need for Singaporeans to become highly proficient listeners of English. It is therefore truly surprising that so little time has been devoted to the teaching and testing of effective listening in our schools.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Some implications for improving the teaching of listening comprehension are outlined below:

1. Set aside time for teaching listening.

Because of the backwash effect of public exams, where reading and writing are given a heavy weighting, teachers have mainly concentrated on the teaching of reading comprehension and composition writing. The result is that listening is often very low in the list of teaching priorities, particularly with secondary school pupils who do not have to sit for a listening comprehension exam at "O" level. We need to redress this imbalance. English departments can make it a policy to have at least one lesson a week, or every two weeks, that is dedicated to the teaching of listening skills.

2. Raise pupils' metacognitive awareness about listening.

Motivate them to consider the importance of listening and the ways in which they can help themselves become better listeners. Use focus group discussions, reflective journals and pre- and post-listening tasks (see Goh, 1997 for further details).

3. Teach a variety of skills for comprehension.

Our text books for English show a strong tendency to focus solely on the ability to listen for details. Although this is an important listening skill, it is only one of many essential skills. As a matter of fact, a great deal of our everyday listening involves forming reasonable interpretations, not remembering parts of the input verbatim. There is therefore a need for teachers to use listening tasks for forming general interpretations based on prior knowledge and contextual clues. There is also a need for more open-ended questions which encourage drawing inferences.

4. Help pupils develop effective listening strategies.

Give pupils opportunities to apply cognitive strategies such as inferencing and prediction. Short, incomplete dialogues or passages could be used for this purpose. Pupils should also learn to infer the meaning of a message in spite of the presence of some unfamiliar words.

Another important group of strategies to develop in pupils is metacognitive strategies. These include selecting those parts to pay special attention to, monitoring and keeping attention on input, monitoring how well and how much is understood, and evaluating their comprehension. Pupils should also learn social strategies that can help them to seek clarification and ask for repetitions when they do not understand what they hear (see Mendelsohn, 1995 and Vandergrift, 1999 for more details).

5. *Include short listening exercises that focus on word recognition skills.*

These exercises are aimed at helping weak language learners. They include listening and noting down key content words from a short passage, making short summaries of what is heard and listening to a recording and looking at the transcript simultaneously (see Field, 1998 for more details).

6. *Teach critical listening.*

Secondary four (express) and gifted pupils are exempted from taking listening exams. The assumption appears to be that these pupils who are generally fluent in their English are already good listeners and there is, therefore, little need to assess their listening comprehension. This assumption is, however, debatable. Pupils who appear to have few problems with listening for comprehension should be further challenged with listening tasks that require them not only to understand what they hear but also critically evaluate the message. This can be approached in terms of the logic of an argument, the merit and the implications of a proposal, and the underlying assumptions of the speaker. At the same time, pupils should be taught to withhold judgements until they have heard a speaker out and have carefully considered the views expressed.

7. *Modify assessment formats.*

The current public examinations on listening (PSLE and N level) tend to focus far too much on listening for details. Classroom assessment formats and listening activities in student workbooks have taken the cue and are structured mainly along the same lines. Given the range of important listening skills that an individual needs to develop, assessment formats should be reviewed to include some of these skills. For a start, there should be more questions in both formal and informal assessment that test the ability to form a reasonable interpretation of a message as well as inferring moods, events, motives, assumptions and other things that are not

obviously stated. Pupils can also be tested for their ability to evaluate the ideas that they hear. All these are important aspects of listening that can have an impact on an individual's learning and interpersonal skills.

8. *Help pupils develop the patience to listen.*

As we have seen, active listening is a complex skill that demands time and effort. Being part of the MTV and high-speed computing generation, many of our pupils may not have learned the patience to listen, particularly in class. Nevertheless, we can motivate pupils by raising their awareness about the importance of good listening skills, as well as encouraging them to use relevant strategies for managing their listening. In addition, we need to use stimulating and challenging listening activities in class which give them a good reason to want to listen and at the same time provide opportunities for the development of the types of purposeful listening mentioned in this article.

These are meant to be general suggestions. Pupils in Singapore come from diverse backgrounds in terms of home languages, so some will no doubt be more competent users of the English Language than others. Teachers will need to consider their pupils' language proficiency and background when selecting and designing listening materials. The age of the pupils, their interests and level of cognitive development, the types and the length of listening texts as well as the demands of listening tasks should all be taken into consideration.

SOURCES

Anderson, J. R. (1985). *Cognitive Psychology and its Implications*. New York: Freeman.

Anderson, A & T. Lynch (1988). *Listening*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bacon, S. M. (1992). The relationship between gender, comprehension, processing strategies, and cognitive and affective response in foreign language listening. *Modern Language Journal* 76/ 2: 41-56.

Bartlett, F. C. (1932). *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Chamot, A. U. (1995). Learning strategies and listening comprehension. In. D. Mendelsohn and J. Rubin (eds.). *A Guide for the Teaching of Second Language Listening*. CA: Dominic Press.

Chamot, A. U., J. Robbins, & P.B. El-Dinary (1993). Learning strategies in Japanese foreign language instruction: final report. Eric Clearinghouse on languages and Linguistics.

Conrad, L. (1985). Semantic versus syntactic cues in listening comprehension. *Studies in*

Second language Acquisition. 7: 59-72.

Færch C. & G. Kasper. (1986). The role of comprehension in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics* 7: 257-274.

Field, J. (1998). Skills and strategies: towards a new methodology for listening. *ELT Journal*, 52/2, 110-118.

Goh, C. (1997). Metacognitive awareness and second language listeners. *ELT Journal*, 51/3 361-369.

Goh, C. (1998a). Strategic processing and metacognition in second language listening. Unpublished PhD thesis. Lancaster University, UK.

Goh, C. (1998b). How learners with different listening abilities use comprehension strategies and tactics. *Language Teaching Research*, 2/2:124-147

Johnson, K. & K. Morrow. (1981). (eds.). *Communication in the Classroom*. UK: Longman.

Krashen, S.D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: issues and implications*. London: Longman. McLaughlin, B., T. Rossman & B. McLeod. 1983. Second language learning: An information processing perspective. *Language Learning*, 33, 135-58.

Mendelsohn, D. (1995). Applying learning strategies in the second/ foreign language listening comprehension lesson. In D. Mendelsohn & J. Rubin (eds.) *A Guide for the Teaching of Second Language Listening*. San Diego: Dominic Press.

O'Malley, J.M., A.U. Chamot & L. Küpper (1989). Listening comprehension strategies in second language acquisition. *Applied Linguistics* 10/4: 418-437.

Postovsky, V.A. (1974). Effects of delay in oral practice at the beginning of second language learning. *Modern Language*

Journal, 58: 229-239.

Rost, M. (1990). *Listening in Language Learning*, London: Longman

Rubin, J. (1994). A review of second language listening comprehension research. *Modern Language Journal*, 78/ 2: 199-221.

Rumelhart, D.E. (1980). Schemata: The building blocks of cognition. In R. Spiro, B. Bruce & W. Brewer (eds.). *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Thompson, I. & J. Rubin (1993). Improving listening comprehension in Russian. Report to International Research and Studies Program. US Department of Education, Washington, D.C.

Vandergrift, L. (1999). Facilitating second language listening comprehension: acquiring successful strategies. *ELT Journal* 53/3: 168-176.

Vogely, A. (1995). Perceived strategy use during performance on three authentic listening comprehension tasks. *Modern Language Journal*, 79/i, 41-56.

Widdowson, H. (1978). *Teaching Language as Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wolff, D. (1987). Some assumptions about second language text comprehension. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 9: 307-326.

Wolvin, A. & C. G. Coakely. (1996). *Listening* (5th edition). Dubuque: Brown & Benchmark Publishers.

Young, M.Y.C. (1997). A serial ordering of listening comprehension strategies used by advanced ESL learners in Hong Kong. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching* 7: 35-53.