

WHY TEACHING SECOND LANGUAGE LISTENING IS DIFFICULT AND HOW TO USE BOTTOM-UP LISTENING STRATEGIES TO TEACH LISTENING MORE EFFECTIVELY

By Christina Cole

Listening is the skill that most of our students feel the least confident about and the least control over in terms of what they can do to improve. It is also the skill that is the most widely used, both in academic and non-academic contexts. For these reasons, we owe it to our students to show them how to become successful English language listeners.

Second-language listening is difficult for several reasons, most of which stem from the differences between oral and written channels (Brown, 2011). These include perception problems, issues of memory and attention, and strategy choice.

Perception problems arise because speech is fast and transient; utterances are spoken quickly, and they disappear. We don't pause to separate speech into distinct words; instead it comes out as a stream of sound. Also, words don't usually sound the way they look in writing. Thus, even if our learners are familiar with the printed form of a word they may not recognize its pronunciation, particularly in connected speech. It is also difficult to predict the content of speech and guessing from context is highly over-rated (Douglas, 2013). Real world speech is also full of redundancies, extra language that includes false starts, digressions, and rephrasing, and this extra language confuses learners.

Speech also puts a burden on memory and attention, making it difficult for learners to hold everything in their memory. Attention is diverted by the competing demands of unfamiliar vocabulary, phonological changes, grammatical structures, and the length of the text. This slows learners down and they may spend several seconds trying to figure out a word and miss what comes next.

Studies of second-language listeners have found that poor listeners often have poor listening strategies. They listen word by word and are reluctant to revise an incorrect interpretation (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Field, 2003). On the other hand, poor listeners also fail to implement the metacognitive strategies that successful listeners do such as focusing on key words, self-monitoring, verifying and adapting their interpretation based on new information, problem-solving to adjust their listening, and evaluating their overall comprehension (O'Malley, Chamot & Kupper, 1989).

Process or Product

It is sometimes assumed that listening is acquired effortlessly by osmosis, but listening is actually an active process of meaning-making. Despite this realization, much of what passes for listening instruction is just testing listening ability (Brown, 2011). Siegel found that 70% of classroom activities observed in 30 lessons among 10 EFL instructors in Japan focused on checking comprehension (2014). This finding is likely generalizable to many listening classrooms. Checking comprehension, however, doesn't actually give learners insight on how to listen or show them how to listen better. Instead it focuses on the product of listening not the process. A consequence of this focus on product is anxiety among learners and an association of listening with evaluation.

The alternative to a product-oriented approach is process-oriented (sometimes called learner-oriented) listening. Process-oriented listening is a more holistic approach which raises learners' awareness about the listening process and models the mental processes that take place as they construct their understanding of a listening text (Ngyuen & Abbott, 2016). It advocates spending more time on the actual listening stage, identifying learner difficulties, and giving instruction on how to resolve problems. This is exemplified by Vandergrift and Goh (2012), and Richards' listening as acquisition, which stresses an equal emphasis on production or speaking (Richards, 2005). Indeed, Richards' approach shares much in common with bottom up listening as evidenced by his comments that we have ignored activities that "require accurate recognition and recall of words, syntax, and expression that occurred in the input [such as] dictation, cloze exercises, [and] identifying differences between a spoken and written text" (Richards, 2005, p. 87). In the interests of space, I will focus here primarily on bottom-up listening.

Bottom Up Listening

Bottom up listening refers to a focus on individual sounds, words, grammatical and textual patterns in order to segment the sound stream into recognizable words and create meaning. Learners' attention is drawn to phonological aspects, vocabulary, stress and intonation, thought groups, textual schemata, and grammatical structures. Dictation and simultaneous listening and script reading are used to promote "noticing" of gaps between what is heard and what is understood (Schmidt, 2001; Thornbury, 1997). However, unlike the top-down approach, bottom up listening hasn't received much attention particularly in current textbooks (with some exceptions such as the *Top-up* series by Abax).

Vocabulary knowledge plays a huge role in listening comprehension, accounting for as much as 50% of success in listening (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Learners identify weak vocabulary knowledge as the biggest problem in listening comprehension (Goh, 2000). Vandergrift (2006) has called for a larger role for vocabulary in listening development specifically. Learners need to encounter a word on average 12 times in a non-trivial focused way in order to retain it (Brown, 2011, p. 50). For this reason, learners need

multiple exposures to vocabulary. Moreover, even when a word is known, aural realization is especially important since learners need to recognize it, particularly how it sounds in connected speech, not just its written form or in isolation. Incorporating vocabulary from frequency-based words lists such as the Academic Word List should be employed. In addition, teaching listeners to notice textual elements such as macro markers, discourse markers, and micro markers is valuable as these provide important cues about the internal structure of academic discourse and serve different functions.

Moreover, experts on listening instruction recommend that collocations should also be taught. Although they do not approximate the frequency of high-frequency words, searching a corpus for collocations of words reveals that certain words are more commonly encountered in proximity to other words and knowing the likelihood of these will make it easier for listeners to identify lexical chunks instead of having to listen for each individual word. For example, *rapid* is most frequently collocated with *growth* whereas *speedy* or *fast* is virtually never collocated with *growth* (COCA, 2018). The same rationale can be applied to teaching idioms and fixed phrases (common lexical chunks). When we create gap fills or cloze exercises for our learners we should include gaps for whole phrases not just individual words. Teaching learners to recognize fixed phrases or idioms (along with their stress patterns) means they don't need to work as hard at identifying each word individually.

Pronunciation

More attention to pronunciation and the integration of listening and speaking (Reed & Michaud, 2018) is also part of the bottom-up approach. We often underestimate the importance of teaching pronunciation to improve listening comprehension. By integrating speaking and listening, we help learners acquire the language they hear. Moreover, much of our listening in the real world is reciprocal or two-way in contrast to the focus in the majority of listening classrooms where learners listen to a video or audio file but do not interact with it as in a conversation.

Since speech undergoes many phonological changes, we need to teach learners to listen for such aspects as reductions, deletions, assimilation, and linking. Linking contributes to the stream of sound so it is important that learners identify when and how it occurs. English also is full of consonant blends, and these are frequently created between words.

Another important element of pronunciation when it comes to listening is stress patterns. English speakers depend on stress to interpret meaning. Just as producing incorrect stress patterns in speech may lead to second-language learners being misunderstood, so too they may not decode a word correctly because they haven't learned its correct stress pattern. Additionally, stress and intonation help second-language listeners to hear word segmentation (Brown, 2011). Missing a small reduced syllable can lead to a complete misinterpretation of meaning such as confusing *it's legal* and *it's illegal*.

Pedagogical Principles & Ideas

An important pedagogical principle in listening instruction is not necessarily having learners listen for everything all at once. Instead, we can have learners listen in a focused way multiple times for different aspects. Obviously, the listening text will determine what we will have our learners listen for. We can also vary the response required depending on the difficulty of the text and the level of the learner. A response can be as simple as having learners raise their hands when they hear the target structure. One activity that is useful for teaching linking is having learners listen to a song with the lyrics in front of them marked up for different types of linking. Then, they can listen again with a clean copy of the lyrics and see if they can indicate the linking. This activity can be modified to have learners mark thought groups, stressed words, or complete a gap fill.

Dictation

Dictation is a useful activity in bottom-up listening. It can be used to draw attention to the correspondence between reduced or contracted forms and full forms. It can also be used to have learners pay attention to lexical chunks, grammatical structures or thought groups. Focusing on dictation at either sentence level or beyond allows teachers to see where learners are having difficulties. Brown (2011) outlines several progressive variations on simple dictation such as dictogloss, communicative dictation, and discovery listening, which have their roots in Swain's concept of collaborative dialogue. The key to doing dictation well is to provide multiple attempts and focus on the process, not just the product.

Dictogloss differs from straight dictation in that listeners do not aim for an exact reproduction of the audio text. The text is read twice at normal speed and listeners write whatever words or phrases they can. Then, in groups they pool their efforts and strive to reconstruct the meaning. The goal is to negotiate the original meaning even if the words are slightly different.

Communicative dictation includes multiple variations but essentially it goes beyond simple transcription and is "communicative" because listeners work together after the initial dictation. It can involve listeners finding differences between the audio text and a written text and noticing the gap between what they heard and what was written. This could mean correcting differences in the transcript or in captions, which are often incorrect.

Another variation is jigsaw listening in which listeners hear different parts of a text or different versions of a text and then work together to reconstruct a logical version. Discovery listening (Wilson, 2003) builds on dictogloss. Learners hear an oral text three times, once without note-taking, then noting down key words, and finally expanding on these notes. Wilson adds a step where learners compare their text with the original transcript and classify the cause of their errors or difficulties into categories such as "couldn't hear a sound", "couldn't separate the sounds", "unknown word" etc... . This last phase develops metacognitive awareness and sound-form comparisons.

These activities illustrate that transcripts can be used effectively to build up learners' listening skills and shouldn't be viewed as somehow "cheating". Research has shown that, in fact, this type of activity improves learners' listening scores and also increases their use of complex vocabulary and syntax (Kiany & Shiramiry, 2002; Kim, 2008; Qin, 2008; Swain & Lapkin, 2001).

Think Alouds

Let me conclude with one last strategy that teachers can employ: the think aloud. Teachers can model their own internal cognitive process in making sense of a listening text. An example I use is how I arrived at the understanding of *mellow* as a pejorative word in Susan Cain's "[The power of introverts](#)" TED talk (March 2012) by considering tone of voice used for the word, its contrast with the word *rowdy* used to designate camp spirit, and the counsellor's advice to be more *outgoing*. All of these clues conflict with the dictionary definition of *mellow* and provide an awareness that *mellow* in this context is a negative attribute. However, it is also vital to listen to learners' think alouds to gain insight into the difficulties they are having and offer feedback and assistance. These think alouds can later be formalized into a written listening journal where learners outline, using specific examples, what aspects gave them problems and what strategies they used to overcome these problems.

In conclusion, listening is hard work and motivating learners is essential. Learners are more motivated to listen to texts they are interested in, so, in choosing listening materials, we should make sure we include appealing listening activities such as songs, TV shows, and short podcasts related to their interests or future areas of study.

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Author Bio



Christina Cole teaches Academic Listening and Speaking in the International Foundation Program at the University of Toronto. She has an M.A. in Applied Linguistics from York University. She has presented at TESOL, TESL Ontario, and TESL affiliates on topics as diverse as teaching L2 listening, teaching pronunciation using screen casting, and building resiliency through technology. She was team lead in the development and launch of TESL Ontario's inaugural webinar series. Currently, she is a member of a research project at York University, investigating language teaching technology use in post-secondary EAP programs.