HELPING STUDENTS DEVELOP LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Melba Libia Cárdenas B.
Foreign Languages Department
Universidad Nacional de Colombia

Listening practice is often neglected or handled inappropriately in the teaching-learning process. This poses problems because listening is an integral part of conversations. Oral skills without equally well-developed listening abilities are of little practical value. In this article, I will take a look at issues related to the area of listening that may be considered when guiding students toward developing listening comprehension.

Introduction

Students of English are expected to interpret spoken messages related to cultural, technological and daily issues, among others. It is also assumed that learners demonstrate comprehension by developing assigned tasks. However, listening comprehension work is very often disregarded or neglected. In most cases, it is carried out through practices that produce boredom, panic or frustration: repetition of the whole text (word-for-word) by appealing to short-term memory, and answering a series of questions on the factual content of the listening text. As can be seen, more emphasis is given to the literal meaning of the message than to the speaker's intended meaning. Hence, it is necessary to examine alternatives for dealing with listening practices.

Learning to listen

Bearing in mind that learners will find themselves in a variety of situations where they will need or want to listen to English being used in real life, one can start by examining what 'learning to listen' means. By 'learning to listen' we mean that "we want our students to attend to what they hear, to process it, to understand it, to interpret it, to evaluate it, and to respond to it. We want them to become active listeners" (Underwood: 1989, 4).

Understanding happens because the listener assumes an active role by using different types of information sources such as knowledge of the language system, knowledge of the context or background, and knowledge of the socio-cultural event implicit in the spoken message being processed.

Following Brown and Yule's (1985) analysis of the stages between listening understanding and the task response, we can look at the following sequence of abilities implicit in that process:

1. The listener interprets the message and constructs a representation of these items in memory

2. The learner has to interpret the listening task instructions which specify the kind of response required

3. The learner has to understand how to relate what is required by the task to the type of language input (i.e. what and how to present information)

4. The learner has to produce a task response.

We could add a stage to the sequence given above: the learner has to respond to feedback coming from peers or from teachers, once a task response is produced. In so doing, the learner is not performing the role of a mere producer of responses, but of an active participant who can handle unexpected interactions that may appear in the language exchange.

Organising listening practices: Planning a listening lesson

In order to make our students aware of the abilities mentioned above, we should plan the amount and rate of the learning activities. We can note that the amount and rate of learning is influenced by the nature of the subject-matter itself, and the order in which it is presented. These two hints should be taken into account in listening practices carried out in the English classroom, assuming that they may determine the effectiveness of the implementation of the activities.

Choosing the subject-matter of the listening practices. It is important to remark that very often, as teachers, we cannot distance ourselves too much from the book because we have to 'cover' certain amounts of contents within a restricted period of time. Thus, it would be reasonable to take the same recorded-texts given by the textbooks in order to provide students with diverse opportunities to process them. In other words, we can use the tapes in a slightly different manner from that envisaged by the textbook writers in order to develop real-life listening skills.

The way the listening activities are presented. In many cases, listening comprehension activities seem to aim largely at exposing students to the sounds of the language and at practising language items. These two aims are valid. However, although the process works in most classes -in the sense of question, answer and drill work-, it tends to be somewhat repetitive and mechanical. For this reason, very often we opt for supplementing the listening part by using communicative oriented tasks.

A common-sense way of dividing up listening practices is into three phases: pre-listening, while-listening, and follow-up (also named post-listening). The following sample illustrates the way the three stages can be integrated in a listening lesson:

Sample of a listening lesson

Achievement indicators:
Sings a song about animals' protection and draws T-shirts with ecological messages related to the content of the song.
Writes a list of endangered animals in his/her country.
Takes part in the design of posters for an ecological campaign encouraging other members of the school to protect animals.

Materials: Cassette, coloured pencils, a big sheet of cardboard or paper, cuttings from magazines or drawings about the protection of animals, scissors and glue.

Pre-listening: Brainstorm and speculate

1. Students brainstorm for suggestions to protect animals:
Protect all the species
Leave wild animals free
Get a home for pet animals
Help sick animals
Don't mistreat animals
Respect animals' habitats
Look after your pet / Care for your pet.
2. Students observe and comment on the picture accompanying the song *'Animal Protectors' Club'*. The teacher guides them through questions like these:
What do you see?
Where are the children?
What's the name of the club?
What are the children doing?

While-listening: Listen for detail

1. Students listen to the song to answer the question: What do the children do in the 'Animal Protectors' Club'?
2. Students listen to the song again and read in their books to check answers.
3. The class sings the song.

Song: Animal Protectors' Club

I'm very happy
I belong to a club
We protect animals
It is really fun!

I'm very happy
Join us soon!
Just follow these rules
You will see, it's good!

Respect their habitat.
Protect the species.
Leave wild animals free
Care for them, please!

I'm very happy
I belong to a club
We protect animals
It is really fun!

Post-listening: Draw, design a poster and display it

1. Students read the lyrics of the song and identify the rules or recommendations of the Animal Protectors' Club (Respect animals' habitat; Protect all species, etc.).
2. Students design messages on the T-shirts the children of the club are wearing. They draw and write the words corresponding to the Club's rules or recommendations.
3. Students complete the statement: *Endangered animals in my country...* They can consult Science books or encyclopaedias. A list of endangered animals is written on the board.
4. Students work in small groups. They make a poster with an ecological message and get ready to do an ecological campaign.
5. Posters are pinned up in the school and students read or explain their work to their partners.

(From Cárdenas: 1999)

Criteria for choosing and grading listening materials and tasks

Very often we argue we cannot integrate listening practice in class because of various constraints (e.g. limited resources, physical conditions of the workplace, students' limited knowledge of English). Additionally, provided that teachers commit themselves to exploiting the sources available, a mixture of 'live' and recorded material offers a wide range of listening experiences. In 'live' presentations, teachers and students fulfil the role of speakers, and these face-to-face exchanges contribute to the students' learning experience. Hence, the need for the teacher to provide as much genuine communicative input as possible.

Rixon (1986) proposes three ways of obtaining suitable materials: getting published materials and using them as they stand, adapting published resources, and making our own materials. In any case, it is suggested that we examine to what extent the listening texts fit the elements of gradation set out in the teaching-listening methodology. Following the recommendations proposed by Underwood (1989) and Anderson and Lynch (1988), in the coming paragraphs we will examine the main elements to be considered in the listening-comprehension materials:

Authenticity. 'Authenticity' -in Widdowson's view (1984) - is a function of the interaction between the hearer and the text, which incorporates the intentions of the speaker. 'Genuiness', on the other hand, is a characteristic of the text itself. Given these concepts, we must say that choosing materials because they are genuine is not enough. Genuine texts do not necessarily lead to authenticity. It does not imply that genuine texts cannot be used, but bearing in mind the circumstances of English language teaching in many of our places of work, I feel inclined to argue that materials should be chosen on the basis of usability rather than mere representatives of the target situation. In view of this, we can opt for presenting versions of some selected samples in which the idiosyncratic stylistic effects have been filtered out. As teaching proceeds (in the same level / course), more stylistic features are allowed to appear until the learner is eventually confronted with genuine samples. In so doing, we attempt to reach the point where genuineness corresponds to authenticity.

The level of difficulty of the vocabulary. The idea here is to examine if the amount of new vocabulary is reasonable and whether it might constitute a problem for understanding the content of the text. Besides, knowledge of vocabulary is not enough to make students good listeners. By contrast, if we over-emphasise the vocabulary work, we would lead students to focus on the language word by word. This does not mean that in practice our students might not face problems of vocabulary. In heterogeneous classes, some learners will need more guidance. Therefore, we should make them realise that speakers often say things more than once or rephrase them; or another speaker echoes what has been said. Moreover, we can appeal to techniques for vocabulary work (e.g. context, cognates, synonyms, mimics). By doing so, we can

prevent panic, which often incapacitates learners from performing efficiently in the listening tasks.

The complexity of syntax. It is not always possible to match listening materials with the language being taught at any particular time of a course. However, we can select texts which provide comprehensible input and which are at a reasonable level of difficulty

i.e. a flow of language which contains elements already known plus some which may have yet to be mastered.

The following example, cited by Anderson and Lynch (1988: 83) illustrates that in presenting learners with what are intended to be grammatically 'simplified' versions of original texts, we may actually make the texts more difficult to understand.

Tapescript A (Version A)

<u>Introduction</u>. *This is a drawing of an island which is oval in shape, or egg-shaped. It contains a number of land features which are indicated by words not pictures.*
<u>Description</u>. *In the middle of your paper draw a large oval, measuring roughly fifteen centimetres across, by about seven centimetres (or half its width) down.*
(Jordan: 1982, 59)

Tapescript B (Version B)
'Okay right I've got an island + a map of an island in front of me + and I'm going to tell you how to draw the island + and I want you to draw it on your paper + now um the island looks rather like a baked potato + and is about five inches in length + and about + has a diameter of about three inches + so the first thing if you could just draw that + could you just draw that kind of shape + that will give you the outline of the island'.
(From Lynch: 1984)

As can be seen above, spontaneously produced speech (as in version B) is grammatically simpler in a general sense than written language produced for listening purposes (as in version A). Similarly, the relatively simple structure of the spoken language has advantages for the listeners, who have to demonstrate understanding by performing a task or action (draw) under time pressure, just as they follow what the speaker says.

Length of the text or duration of the recording. Though criterion of length is closely related to listener fatigue and effect on memory load, there can be no strict rules about the length of listening texts for a particular level (Underwood: 1989). Long texts are difficult when students struggle to grasp every word, or when they insist on short-term memory, when the information is not explicit, or when they are not familiar with the topic. Provided there is a specific

task, long passages, however, give us more chances to understand what is being said.

Content. What ought to be appropriate for the students to understand might be content which they are most familiar with, and which interests them. The process of understanding the meaning of the message will be characterised by the use of background knowledge: grammar, vocabulary, information structure, topic of discourse, and situational / contextual knowledge.

Response required of the intended listener. Since it is not feasible to find materials that interest every student, materials should be intended for doing a variety of things in class by involving listeners in reacting to language e.g. eavesdropper, participant, and different types of response. I will refer to this aspect later on, when addressing the issue of listening activities.

Speaker and style of delivery. Aspects such as the number of speakers, speed of speech, accent, spontaneity (fillers, repetitions, redundant parts that permit processing time), and pauses between groups of words should be borne in mind. It is recommended that in the early stages of their learning, students not be faced with too many variables at once. The transition to material which incorporates a wider variety of styles and voices should be done gradually.

Regarding the issue of varieties of English, Harmer (1998) argues that despite the desirability of exposing students to many varieties, common sense is called for. The number of different varieties (and the degree to which they are different from the one students are learning) will be a matter for the teacher to judge, based on the students' level and needs, where the classes are taking place, etc. But even if students only hear occasional varieties of English which are different from the teachers', it will give them a better idea of the globalised language which English has become.

Support. In order to ensure that students experience success in arriving at a reasonable interpretation of the foreign language, as many helpful support systems as possible should be provided (Brown and Yule: 1985). As students progress, reliance on external support (realia, visual aids, clues to solve tasks, overview of the ideas to be presented in the text, transcripts) can gradually be withdrawn. This will lead learners to rely more on language itself. With respect to transcripts, I must say that without restricting students from making an effort to understand, they are certainly important sources for checking as well as for remedial work.

Types of purpose. By types of purpose I mean that we choose and grade materials on the basis of the purpose of the course, and the purposes for which the text was produced.

There are many other aspects that may appear when talking about selection and gradation of listening materials. However, I expect that the given criteria will serve as a guide in creating graded sequences of published materials, in designing our own tasks, or in searching for appropriate texts to be exploited.

Integrating listening with other language skills

"Listening should be looked upon not as an appendage, but as integral part of the total package of learning, sometimes leading to and sometimes emerging from other work" (Underwood: 1989, 93). All four conventional skills can be introduced simultaneously, so that practice in one can support and reinforce practice in the others.

One cannot generalise that all language learning experiences should start from listening comprehension. In many cases, listening comprehension is added on to established stages of reading, writing and speaking. In reality, the order and organisation of lessons vary a great deal. Whatever the circumstances, we should have opportunities to give our students listening experiences and to integrate these into the total programme.

Listening activities

Since listening comprehension is a complex activity involving a wide range of different skills, we need a large battery of varied activities that give learners opportunities to develop most, if not all, of these various skills. Definitions, samples, classifications for activity-types and descriptions of procedures suitable for the issues that have been addressed in this article can be found in Underwood (1989), Ur (1990), and Rixon (1986). Among the possibilities pointed out in these sources we have:

Listen and repeat
Listen and discriminate
Listen and perform actions / follow instructions
Listen and draw / colour
Listen and predict
Listen and guess
Listen and label
Listen and match
Listen and sequence
Listen and classify
Listen and transfer information

Even though it is not the case that the activities mentioned here or in the said sources will be the answer to listening comprehension problems, they provide alternatives for teachers' decision making. On the basis of learners' needs and the particular teaching situation, we can choose those activities that help students to arrive successfully at a reasonable interpretation, and allow for experiences in which various strategies and skills can be mastered.

Assessing listening comprehension

For some teachers, it is not very common to test listening separately from speaking, since the two skills work together in oral interaction. Nonetheless, there are occasions in which no speaking is called for in order to ensure students' progress in comprehending spoken messages.

The same listening procedures or activities listed before can be used for testing purposes. What should be borne

in mind is that we should give students tasks in which we do not deduct points for errors of grammar or spelling, provided that it is clear that the correct response is intended. In addition, we should remember that listening activities should not rely too much on reading or writing, otherwise, students spend too much time deciphering the written messages or just writing long responses. If multiple choice is to be used, then the alternatives must be kept short and simple. On the other hand, provided that items are brief, and only short responses are called for, short-answer items can work well in listening tests.

Conclusion

Listening comprehension is a process that we cannot possibly pretend to teach. As the learner faces problems of syntax, speed, vocabulary and meaning to interpret English texts, it is the teacher's job to offer all the facilitating devices and strategies at his/her disposal in order to 'put the student in the most advantageous position to learn for himself how to understand what is said by people, with intentions to communicate in the foreign language' (Anderson and Lynch: 1988, 69).

In this article I have acknowledged the need for students to listen to more than just the sounds in order to develop listening skills. I have also underlined that the goal of including listening comprehension in our lessons is to help our learners cope with listening in real life by providing permanent access to listening experiences. These experiences may be effective if they are constructed round tasks. That is to say, our learners should be required to do something in response to what they hear that demonstrates their understanding. Finally, I have made the point that listening activities do not take place in isolation. Students can manifest their understanding through various ways, including speaking and writing.

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