Teaching Listening
From Comprehension to Acquisition

Jack C. Richards
Common listening problems

• Speakers speak too fast.
• Listeners listen word for word.
• Listeners lack cultural or background knowledge.
• Speakers use too many unfamiliar words.
• Listening takes too much effort and concentration.
Common listening problems

• Recordings are not always clear and are difficult to follow.
• Speakers accents are unfamiliar.
• Tasks are too difficult.
• Listeners cannot recognize words they know when they hear them.
Characteristics of spoken language that can affect listening

- Usually instantaneous. No chance to listen again.
- Speech rates vary considerably.
  - Radio monologs: 160 wpm
  - Conversation: 210 wpm
- Accents vary from native to non-native.
Characteristics of spoken language that can affect listening

• Usually unplanned.
• Often reflects processes of construction.
  – e.g., hesitations, fillers, repeats
• Has a linear structure.
  – hierarchical structure for written discourse (Example)
8 CONVERSATION Wedding day

A 🎧 Listen and practice.

Jill: Your wedding pictures are really beautiful, Emiko.
Emiko: Thank you. Those pictures were taken right after the ceremony.
Jill: Where was the ceremony?
Emiko: At a shrine. When people get married in Japan, they sometimes have the ceremony at a shrine.
Jill: That’s interesting. Were there a lot of people there?
Emiko: Well, usually only family members and close friends go to the ceremony. But afterward we had a reception with family and friends.
Jill: So, what are receptions like in Japan?
Emiko: There’s a big dinner, and after the food is served, the guests give speeches or sing songs.
Jill: It sounds like fun.
Emiko: It really is. And then, before the guests leave, the bride and groom give them presents.
Jill: The guests get presents?
Emiko: Yes, and the guests give money to the bride and groom.

B 🎧 Listen to the rest of the conversation. What did the bride and groom give each guest?
Characteristics of spoken language that can affect listening

• Usually unplanned.

• Often reflects processes of construction.
  – e.g., hesitations, fillers, repeats

• Has a linear structure.
  – hierarchical structure for written discourse

• Often context dependent and personal.
Characteristics of spoken language that can affect listening

- May contain many colloquialisms.
- Characterized by reduced forms and blendings.
- Stress-timed rather than syllable-timed rhythm.
Characteristics of spoken language that can affect listening

- Large cars waste gas.
- The weather in Sydney is very humid in the summer.
Difficulty of listening factors

• Listener’s linguistic knowledge
• Knowledge of the co-text (what went before it)
• Background knowledge
• Learner’s motivation and interest in the topic
Difficulty of listening factors

• Cognitive load of the text
  – topic, text length, text type

• Lexical density
  – ratio of new words to known words

• Task (Example)
LISTENING  In the evening

A  Listen to what Ted, Wanda, and Kim like to do in the evening. Complete the chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorite activity</th>
<th>How often?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B  Listen again. Who is most similar to you – Ted, Wanda, or Kim?
The role of listening

- Goals for teaching listening
  - listening for comprehension
  - listening for language learning
Listening for comprehension

• Purpose for listening:
  – to understand what was said, not how it was said

• Goals for listening:
  – Recognizing and acting on the speaker’s intentions
  – Identifying information from a spoken text  (Example)
LISTENING  Let’s order.

A  Listen to Rex and Hannah order in a restaurant. What did each of them order? Fill in their check.

Phil’s Diner  No. 399825

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

Thank You!  Total _______

B  Listen to the rest of the conversation. Circle the two items that the waiter forgot to bring.
Listening for comprehension

• Listening skills:
  – Listening for details
  – Listening for gist
  – Listening and making inferences
  – Listening selectively
  – Making predictions before listening (Example)
LISTENING  A night at the movies

A  Listen to two critics talk about a new movie. What do they like or not like about it? Rate each item in the chart from 1 to 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acting</th>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Photography</th>
<th>Special effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pauline</td>
<td>......</td>
<td>......</td>
<td>......</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td>......</td>
<td>......</td>
<td>......</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ratings
1 = didn’t like it
2 = OK
3 = liked it very much

B  Look at the chart in part A. Guess how many stars each critic gave the movie. Then listen to the critics give their ratings.

★ poor ★★ fair ★★★ very good ★★★★ excellent
Processes in listening for comprehension:

bottom-up
and
top-down
Bottom-up processing

- How the literal meaning of messages is identified
- Data driven
- Sounds – words – sentences – meaning
- Meaning is extracted from the message
- Goal is to identify topics and propositions
Bottom-up processing

The woman who sat next to me on the plane on my flight from Hong Kong told me her whole life story.
Assumptions underlying bottom-up processing

• Sentences are composed of “chunks” or “constituents.”
• Sentences are the packaging surrounding the propositions.
• Chunks are the building blocks of meaning.
Assumptions underlying bottom-up processing

- Recognizing the correct chunks to arrive at appropriate meaning.
- Lexical and grammatical knowledge, and phonological clues guide listeners to appropriate constituents.
- Once meaning has been identified, the “packaging” is discarded.
Implications for teaching

- Recognizing key words
- Accurate recognition
- Knowledge of vocabulary and syntax
Top-down processing

- How real world knowledge is used in listening comprehension
- Concept or meaning-driven
- From meaning to language
- Makes use of contextual knowledge, schemas and scripts
Contextual knowledge

- Setting
- Participants
- Goals of the participants
- Roles of the participants
- Procedures typically employed
- Expected outcomes (Example)
LISTENING  Fair exchange?

A  Listen to three customers return an item they purchased. What’s the problem? Take notes. Then complete the chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Will the store exchange it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B  Were the solutions fair? Why or why not?
The role of schema

• Schema:
  – organized and interrelated ideas, concepts, and prior knowledge structures
  – abstract representations of objects, events, and relationships in the real world
The role of schema

- **Content schema:**
  - general background knowledge related to a topic
    - e.g., earthquake, divorce, breakfast

- **Formal schema:**
  - knowledge of a particular genre or text type
    - e.g., news report, fairy tale, interview
Implications for teaching

• Word by word listening not needed
• Prediction and guessing key processes
• Message is sampled to confirm expectation
• The basis for normal comprehension
• Employs schemas, scripts, and discourse plans
Recommended lesson structure when teaching listening for comprehension

Pre-listening:

• Set context: Create motivation
Recommended lesson structure when teaching listening for comprehension

While-Listening:

• Extensive listening (followed by questions on context, attitude)
• Pre-set task / Pre-set questions
• Intensive listening
• Checking answers
Recommended lesson structure when teaching listening for comprehension

Post-listening:

• Examining functional language
• Inferring vocabulary meaning
Listening for language learning

• Based on the role of noticing in language learning
Assumptions about the noticing hypothesis

• Key concepts: input, intake, restructuring
• New language is acquired if first noticed in the input.
• A bottom-up approach to listening
• Noticing is facilitated by input at the appropriate level of difficulty.
Assumptions about the noticing hypothesis

- Noticed items become acquired items through practice.
- Acquiring involves restructuring.
- Without restructuring the result is fossilization.
- Activities that “stretch” learners’ language facilitate restructuring or further learning.
Noticing activities

• Returning to the listening texts that served as the basis for comprehension activities
• Using listening texts for language awareness
Noticing activities

Examples of noticing activities:

• Learners identify differences between what they hear and a printed version of the text.
• Complete a cloze version of the text
• Complete sentence stems taken from the text
Noticing activities

Examples of noticing activities:
• Check off from a list expressions that occurred in the text
• Sorting a text from a jumbled version
• Pair dictation
Restructuring Activities

• Oral or written tasks that involve productive use of selected items from the listening text
Restructuring Activities

Examples of restructuring activities:

• Conversational texts - pair reading of the tape scripts
• Written sentence completion tasks - use expressions and other linguistic items from the texts
Restructuring Activities

Examples of restructuring activities:

• Dialog practice
  – based on dialogs that incorporate items from the text

• Role plays
  – Ss use key language from the texts
Two-part strategy

Recommended when there is a connection between listening and speaking skills.

Phase 1: listening as comprehension
Phase 2: listening as language learning
Principles for teaching listening

• Teach rather than test
• Prepare Ss for listening and for the listening text
• Good listeners use appropriate listening strategies
• Teach listening for pleasure and listening to learn
• Listening activities should be purposeful
Thank you

www.professorjackrichards.com