

## THERE'S MORE TO LISTENING THAN MEETS THE EAR

Jane Arnold  
Universidad de Sevilla

### Resumen

En este capítulo se enfatiza la importancia, no siempre reconocida adecuadamente por profesores en el aula e investigadores, de la destreza de la comprensión auditiva para la adquisición de una segunda lengua. Se insiste en la necesidad de tener en cuenta los aspectos afectivos junto con los cognitivos y se dan unas sugerencias para reconceptualizar la comprensión auditiva y para utilizarla en el aula.

### Abstract

In this article, the emphasis is on the importance of listening for second language acquisition, a skill whose importance is not always sufficiently recognized by classroom teachers or researchers. A recognition of the role of affective factors is considered necessary along with cognitive ones, and some suggestions are made on how to reconceptualize listening comprehension and develop it in the classroom.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

If we look at the characters in the language skills show, first no doubt we would have the real star: *speaking*. Most learners of a foreign language manifest that what interests them to the greatest degree is learning to *speak* the language. This is true to the extent that *speaking* is often taken to mean *knowing* the language. We hear people say "She speaks Hungarian and can help you with the translation", when what is obviously implied is that she *knows* the language as *speaking* itself is not being considered. Moving on, we meet *reading*, the intellectual of the show. Reading is another favorite, especially among some specific purpose learners whose main purpose is to extract meaning from text written in English for academic or professional reasons. Furthermore, reading is the skill that generally seems most approachable, less intimidating. Next, we have *writing*, perhaps the artist, with the halo of the glamour of creativity associated with literary production although in many language classes, *writing* doesn't even come onto the classroom radar screen. Finally, down in the passive language cellar among the ashes we have the skill that when discussing communication strategies, Vandergrift (1997) refers to as Cinderella: *listening*.

Many language teachers concede little importance to listening; basically, they see listening comprehension as a matter of pressing a button on the cassette player and having students answer a few multiple choice questions to test if they have understood the tape. Research also has often tended to relegate listening to a role of little importance, due perhaps in part to the traditional attitude of taking listening for granted and in part to the difficulties involved in researching the contents of the black box. Schmidt-Rinehart

(1994:180) called attention to the urgency of remedying this situation: <<The field of second language research is in desperate need of studies that investigate listening as a unique skill. Furthermore, investigation is needed to probe the impact of specific factors considered to influence listening comprehension>>. Fortunately, greater attention is starting to be paid to listening and to the complex set of factors relating to it.

## 2. LISTENING AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The basic goal of any program of foreign language education is to facilitate language acquisition. How that may best be done is still open to much debate. However, numerous authors affirm that listening comprehension is a key factor, especially, although not only, in the early stages of second language learning (Asher, 1977; Krashen 1985; Long, 1985; Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Richards, 1990; Rost, 1990 and 1994; Dunkel, 1991; Vogely, 1999). Through exposure to the language in the form of comprehensible input, learners are able to internalize language elements and, in time and to different degrees, acquire the language. This is the same process which allows all normal human beings to acquire their first language, and it seems that a similar process is in operation in the case of a second (or third) language.

Oral comprehension has been defined as the <<mental processes by which listeners take in the sounds uttered by a speaker and use them to construct an interpretation of what they think the speaker intended to convey>> (Clark and Clark, 1977:43). Rost (1990:155) defines learning to listen as a <<continuous process of the listeners' attempting to increase their capacity to interpret and respond to language events>>. Lynch (1996:13) summarizes the importance of comprehension for the language acquisition process:

“for language learners, successful comprehension has an importance beyond the short-term satisfaction of having understood. Comprehension is now regarded as an important potential route to progress in the foreign language. There are some applied linguists who regard it as the primary route.”

Schumann (1999:40), however, points out that instructed second language learning is <<learning under conditions of environmental deprivation>> because <<no language teaching method can provide an adequate alternative to the natural conversational interaction with others which the brain requires to learn a language during the sensitive period>>. In other words, classrooms cannot provide the input we received when learning our L1. As Rost (1994:135) puts it, <<When we were children, access to our first language was, in most cases, virtually continuous [...]. Second language learners, particularly adults, seldom experience this same access to rich, understandable input>>. Thus, in instructed second language learning it would be advisable to search for ways to facilitate greater listening comprehension to take better advantage of the input, albeit limited, that learners receive in the classroom.

### 3. LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION

Communication often seems to be associated more with the aspect of speaking. In the information processing model which was developed in the 1940s, the role of listening in communication was limited. It was considered a bottom-up process originating in the linguistic code in the speaker's mind in which the listener does the following: takes in raw speech, keeps a phonological representation of the speech in working memory, tries to organize this representation into its constituent parts, constructs meaning connections between these parts or propositions, builds up a hierarchy of these propositions, retains, not the exact words taken in, but rather the propositional meaning extracted from the words (Clark and Clark, 1977:49). The model assumed, at least in a weak form, Locke's well known affirmation that words should produce in the listener's mind exactly the same ideas as was in the speaker's. Thus, it posits a perfectly matched encoding-decoding process in which a signal on one end reaches its destination (the listener) much the same way a signal from a radio transmitter reaches the radio receptor.

This model could be considered lacking in several ways: it includes a passive recipient of language, it ignores the importance of negotiation and, unjustly, puts all the communicative responsibility with the speaker. In other words, it is not a model of real communication. The communicative act includes an important element of collaboration on the part of the listener through which the listener is actively involved in negotiating and constructing meaning. As with learning in general, in listening learners are involved in a continual process of individual construction of meaning.

Most models of foreign/second language teaching today have as one of their main goals developing communicative competence. However, communication is not only the goal; it is the means by which learners reach their goal. For language learners to acquire communicative competence, listening comprehension is of paramount importance, both for short term and long term reasons. It will enable them to begin to acquire the language and then, as this occurs, will make it possible for them to participate in increasingly more complex communicative situations, since they will understand what is being said and will thus be in a situation to be able to produce an appropriate response. This, in turn, will lead to their receiving more input for further listening and further language development. Rost (1990:155) refers to the concept of the hermeneutic circle: <<what we understand is based on what we already know, and what we already know comes from being able to understand>>. In this continuous process learners constantly improve their ability to understand/interpret and to respond in such a way so as to facilitate further communication.

Rost (1990:3-4) considers communication from the relevance theory model, which is in consonance with the constructivist view of comprehension as it <<holds that communication is fundamentally a collaborative process involving **ostension** (production of signals by a speaker) and **inference** (contextualizing those signals by a hearer)>>. He emphasizes the importance of the hearer in comprehension: <<Relevance theory places responsibility for constructing an acceptable understanding (finding a relevant link) on the listener. This view suggests that understanding involves both decoding processes [...] and inferential processes>>.

In models of communicative competence knowledge of the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of language use are included both for speakers and for listeners, though speaking has enjoyed more prominence. However, Dunkel (1986:100) claims that the goal of communicative competence is reached <<by putting the horse (listening comprehension) before the cart (oral production). In other words, the key to achieving proficiency in speaking is developing proficiency in listening comprehension>>.

Current views of listening are beginning give a much more powerful role to the listener, to the point that Garcés and Bou (2001) speak of teaching *listenership* in the communicatively focused language classroom. Through back-channelling, the listener is actively signaling to the speaker if s/he understands, and, if not, meaning is then negotiated. The process of comprehension is thus considered to involve the listener in constructing a meaning which may be similar to that of the speaker, but will never be identical since there are many aspects that intervene to prevent an exact match of meanings. As Rost (1944:6) notes, <<we see that much of the input to the listener in understanding must come from inside the listener - that is, from those parts of the brain that have to do with interests, beliefs, values, opinions, attitudes, motives and background knowledge>>. Personal factors such as these, as well as any linguistic or environmental difficulties, will prevent the listener from constructing exactly the same meaning as the speaker's.

Listening performance is further constrained by the discourse context. The listener is generally required to complete the speaker's meaning from information not spoken. For example, from the words <<It's cold in here>>, the listener might be expected to close the window, turn on the heating or a number of other possibilities that would derive from contextual factors. In conversation, from the text spoken and the situation the listener is frequently required to construct a mental picture to reach an understanding, filling in details that are missing or only implied.

While it is certainly not the case that there is no objective correspondence to our words as when Humpty Dumpty said to Alice in Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* <<When I use a word... it means just what I choose it to mean>>, a part of the meaning of a word will inevitably be different for the speaker and the listener. A simple stereotypical example is the case of a French learner of English who sees that *bread* means *pain* but who probably brings to mind a different reality than would someone from the United States when he hears the word *bread*. Locke's exact correspondence in two minds is, then, essentially impossible. However, much can be done in the language classroom to help listeners come sufficiently close to the speaker's meaning for communication to take place.

#### **4. NEW WAYS TO CONCEPTUALIZE AND DEAL WITH LISTENING IN CLASSROOM LANGUAGE LEARNING**

As has been suggested, in our language classrooms the concept of listening has been deemphasized to the detriment of the language acquisition process. In an attempt to promote acquisition through better listening in this section several suggestions will be given. As teachers work with listening, however, they would do well to recognize that

although listening is a cognitive process, it has an important affective base which can influence success in comprehension in numerous ways. For example, Mendelsohn (1994:111) notes that <<it is very important to provide activities that will help to boost students confidence>>.

#### 4.1. Empathy and active listening as part of communicative interaction

Before working with listening comprehension, that is, understanding spoken texts it is wise to consider listening, just listening. Listening not to words but listening to people (See Appendix 2 for some reflections about listening in this sense.) Malderez has said that what is important in the end is not that words have meanings but rather that people have meanings that they use words to convey (personal communication in Arnold and Brown 1999). Words, then, are merely the vehicles that carry the meanings between people. In the exchange of meanings, the affective disposition towards the other person in the interactive process can determine to a large extent the success of the interaction.

One factor, empathy, explained generally as <<putting yourself into someone else's shoes>>, is intuitively very significant in cross-cultural aspects of language learning since tolerance for and interest in the target culture could facilitate learning the target language. However, in interpersonal situations such as we find in the classroom a more direct, personal empathy is also important. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998:219) bring in an insightful expression from psychoanalysis, <<listening with the third ear>>, which implies a deep understanding of the other person's reality. Empathy does not mean agreeing with the other person but rather listening in a non-judgemental manner. In an empathic classroom relationship all processing energy can be devoted to the learning task at hand because the learner does not need to divert resources for learning towards protection of the ego from anxiety, threat, stress, confrontation and so forth. All of these, as well as excessive inhibition, can establish barriers to keep learners from being able to turn input into intake in the language learning situation. In the Rogerian framework of facilitation, for those professionals such as teachers who are concerned with promoting human development, three things are necessary: congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding (Rogers 1983).

As Stevick (1980) points out, in an interaction one of the interlocutors may treat the other as a <<linguistic object>> rather than another person, which obviously does not establish the ideal setting for communication. Brown (1994:144) also stresses the importance of empathy for communication:

“In order to communicate effectively you need to be able to understand the other person's affective and cognitive states; communication breaks down when false presuppositions or assumptions are made about the other person's state. From the very mechanical, syntactic level of language to the most abstract, meaningful level, we assume certain structures of knowledge and certain emotional states in any communicative act. In order to make those assumptions correctly we need to transcend our own ego boundaries, or using Guiora's term, to “permeate” our ego boundaries so that we can send and receive messages clearly.”

Underhill (1999) has developed a model for the language educator that is useful in this context. He describes a progression which can take place from Lecturer (a term which he uses in this model for the person who is competent only in the subject, knowledge of the foreign language in this case) to Teacher (who has also acquired skill in teaching methods and techniques to present the subject) to Facilitator (who has all the previous knowledge but who has also discovered the need to generate a positive learning climate and establish helpful relationships in the classroom). Among the Facilitator characteristics is <<the quality of listening and acceptance, the possibility for nonjudgemental interaction>> (Underhill, 1999:130).

This aspect of *listening*, often referred to as *active listening*, is highly useful for the teacher to work on, not specifically in relationship to the listening comprehension skill but for the development of a personal quality that will enable him/her to be a more effective educator. *Active listening* involves some do's and don't's. Among the *do's* are: empathize, listen with attention to both the verbal and nonverbal language of the speaker, show understanding nonverbally and respond nonjudgementally, stay with the speaker, keeping your own agenda out. Some of the *don't's* we find are: agree or disagree, offer opinion or advice, interrupt the speaker's flow of thought. Underhill suggests some special steps for working on listening in this sense (see Appendix 1).

The benefits to language learners of a teacher's concern for this aspect of listening will come mainly from the atmosphere of respect and acceptance created by the teacher which makes it easier for them to take the risks inherent in expressing themselves in a new language. However, learners themselves can also be made aware of the importance of really listening to the person behind the words in their own conversational interaction. Hadfield (1992) suggests the following exercise. In pairs have student A roleplay a person with a problem s/he wants to discuss with B. When A speaks, B doesn't listen, looks at the floor or around the room, providing no comments and showing total lack of interest. Then A roleplays a person with a different problem but this time B is an active listener, making eye contact with B, leaning forward, saying "uh, huh" and so forth. Students then discuss the experience.

Work such as this in the classroom can tie in to Garcés and Bou's (2001) notion of listenership, which stresses that listening, while *receptive*, is not a *passive* skill but rather an *active* one in which learners are busy both constructing meaning and, in face to face interaction, negotiating and providing the speaker with information about whether the message has been successfully understood. Teachers can help their students learn ways to participate more actively as listeners through backchannelling with the appropriate body language (nodding, leaning forward) and verbal comments (*Oh, I see...*, *Oh yes...*, *Mmm...*, *Could you explain that again? ...*, *Are you saying that...?*). They can encourage learners to generate more input this way in interactive listening. Teachers can bring in videos of films in which two characters speak and listen to each other; students observe the conversations and analyze what the listeners do and then try to repeat the conversations themselves, incorporating appropriate listening behaviour.

## 4.2. Language showers

To encourage fairly low level learners to listen to the target language in a relaxed manner, tell them you are going to read to them a text that is beyond their level but that they won't be tested or questioned on it. All they have to do is let the language wash over them. Choose a text with a nice rhythm (poetry by Poe or something from Lewis Carroll for example) to read or find cassette recordings of works of literature, often read by their authors. With a language shower once in a while learners can become sensitized to the music of the language as they are freed momentarily from the need to attend to the meaning. Later, they could listen to a video of a film without the picture and then be asked to find keys to the meaning in the intonation. Are the speakers happy, angry, surprised? This sort of information can be a helpful support for comprehension of the verbal aspects of spoken text.

## 4.3. Shadowing

The fusion of listening and speaking is inevitable in conversation. Tannen (1989:12) writes that

“[...]conversation is not a matter of two (or more) people alternately taking the role of speaker and listener but rather that both speaking and listening include elements and traces of the other. Listening, in this view is an active, not passive enterprise [...] Not only is the audience a co-author, but the speaker is also a co-listener.”

Murphy (2001) has investigated shadowing, a strategy discussed by Tannen, as a pedagogical tool for language learning. Shadowing involves the listener repeating, silently or out loud, all or parts of what the speaker has just said.<sup>1</sup> In recognition of the important role of pronunciation in listening comprehension, students can be encouraged to shadow in order to work on pronunciation when they do not have to focus on the content of what is being said (when they are listening to a tape or watching a video or news report in the foreign language at home or in a classroom situation where they do not have to respond but shadowing can also be useful in a conversational situation as a way for a non-fluent listener/speaker to prevent conversation from closing down. In his research Murphy's students reported that shadowing was highly significant for their language learning; they indicated in journal feedback that <<conversational shadowing allowed them to assert some

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<sup>1</sup> Murphey (2001:129) gives examples of different forms:

*Selective shadowing:*

Terri: I'd like to tell you about two places. The first one is Boston.  
Eriko: Two places. Boston.

*Interactive shadowing:*

Terri: in Vermont. It's a place name. Um. It's a state.  
Eriko: Vermont. Ah, place name. Town name?

control over the process and content of conversations and to build better rapport through reflective listening>> (Murphy, 2001:133). If our goal when working with listening is not merely to have students score well on multiple choice tests but actually to listen effectively to others, shadowing might be a useful activity.

#### 4.4. Mental imagery

Listening comprehension can be particularly problematic for language learners in exam situations. Unlike reading comprehension where the text can be returned to at will, listening comprehension anxiety produced by the non-permanence of the text can severely undermine learners' ability to comprehend the language. Research at the University of Seville (Arnold 1994, 2000, In press) has shown that using relaxation and mental imagery exercises before listening comprehension exams can reduce anxiety and improve comprehension scores. Qualitative data showed that learners felt that these activities permitted them to channel processing energy to more productive tasks than worry and thus comprehend the text in English better. In a delayed retrospective interview (Arnold In press) one learner from the original study later recalled how work with imagery helped her not only to listen in a more relaxed manner but also to process the text in a more efficient way<sup>2</sup>:

“I started to realize how my anxiety had been producing a block which had been keeping me from understanding and had been making me try to understand every word that was said, then translate it to Spanish and finally search for the answer. Instead of hearing words in English that I tried to translate into Spanish and memorize as before, I would see the text in images, much as if I were watching a film or as when you are a child and you listen to a story. I knew I still had to retain information but I was freed from the tension of trying to memorize everything I heard. At the time I didn't know why, but the images gave me confidence in my ability to listen better.”

In a pilot study with students from in a School of Tourism<sup>3</sup> in Andalusia (Arnold 2001) learners in the experimental group listened to a story during six listening sessions and they were instructed to form mental images as if they were watching a film of the story while the control group merely listened to the words. Although due to the high level of attrition in this study the final groups were too small for statistically significant results, there was a definite trend to improvement in the imagery group.

#### 4.5. Unplugging listening

Thornbury has created a movement in language teaching inspired by the Danish Dogme filmmakers, such as Lars von Trier, who reacted against the artificiality and inauthenticity of Hollywood cinema. Similarly, Thornbury's adaptation of Dogme in EFL,

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<sup>2</sup> The interview was carried out in Spanish; comments from it have been translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Javier Ávila and María del Mar Ledesma for assistance with this experiment.



also referred to as *teaching unplugged*, calls for a return to the essentials of teaching instead of a dependency on the tyranny of materials. He explains that <<a Dogme lesson is one that is grounded in the experience, beliefs, desires and knowledge of the people in the room. It is a lesson that is language-rich but where language is not used for display but for meaningful exchange>>. Translating the Dogme film proposals into classroom terms, he says that just as the filmmakers reject sound effects, music, artificial lighting that is not actually present in the setting, when working with listening in the language classroom, we should unplug.

“No recorded listening material should be introduced into the classroom: the source of all "listening" activities should be the students and teacher themselves. The only recorded material that is used should be that made in the classroom itself, e.g. recording students in pair or group work for later re-play and analysis (Thornbury 2000:2).”

This philosophy regarding listening may seem surprising to us as teachers. Nevertheless, learners are in many cases very much in agreement. In the entry on listening comprehension in the learner journals for Methodology classes at the University of Seville, one student commented:

“This class has made me deliberate on the kind of listening texts and activities that I had when I was in the first year at secondary school and the negative effects that this practice caused me[...] The listening texts were always based on the traditional use of tape recorders with their respective comprehension check tasks. Those activities were never based on real-life situations, which would raise learners’ curiosity and motivation. Those artificial passages were almost never adapted to our wants and preferences [...]. This teacher only used recorded material from textbooks. My feelings of failure grew due to the fact that not all the listening texts were adequate for our liking and level.”

Another student was even more emphatic:

“Less use of tape-recorders must be encouraged and more improvising in the TL. [One of our professors] used to tell a personal anecdote in order to make the class more relaxing, interesting. It was obvious that the students enjoyed it.”

Several teaching methods have an unplugged approach to the teaching/learning process in general and by extension to listening comprehension. Community Language Learning (Curran, 1976), Generative Teaching (Wade, 1992) and the Language Experience Approach (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992) all recommend using learner-generated materials as a base for classroom activity. Even though we may not decide to unplug listening completely, as language teachers we can certainly try to use more *real* listening activities. For example, one generally very successful listening exercise is to have students prepare a joke to tell in the target language. This is a very useful for developing the classroom dynamics; as Cohen (2001: 5) has pointed out, one of the advantages of a successful joke is the <<creation of a community of people enough like one another to be laughing at the

same thing. That is a precious achievement ... miraculously available in such a small matter as the telling of a joke>>. If they have doubts about vocabulary, the teacher can provide them with any words needed. They should learn the joke to tell it from memory rather than read it; before telling it, they can preteach any new vocabulary essential for understanding. To make it easier for them to speak in front of others, they tell the joke in small groups. Each group can select the best joke to be told to the whole class. With activities like this some may argue that learners' speech is not a good model for listening. First of all, it would certainly not be the only model they have in the classroom, but also what is clear is that uninteresting, irrelevant texts provide little motivation for listening. As Chomsky (1988:181) has said, <<about 99 percent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material>>. Some unplugging can make listening and learning much more interesting.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Reconceptualizing listening in the language classroom is essential if we recognize the importance of comprehensible input for the language acquisition process. Some basic ways for developing listening have been suggested, and teachers individually or working in groups can easily find others. We should, however, never lose sight of the fact that listening has both cognitive and affective components and that the latter can determine to great extent the effectiveness of the cognitive work. Pike and Selby (1988) bring forth the example of the Chinese ideogram for the word *listen*. It is composed of forms for the following: ear, you, eyes, undivided attention and heart.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Working on listening

#### *1. The way you listen*

1.1 From time to time during lessons try to catch yourself in the act of listening to a student, and notice *how* you listen. Don't change your listening, just notice what you do and how you do it. What else takes your attention apart from the person speaking? What else goes on in you that distracts your attention away from the person you are listening to?

1.2 Can you, while listening to a student, very simply deepen the attention you pay, in a supportive and respectful way? Nothing need look different on the outside, the movement being entirely within. What is that movement? And what is necessary for it to take place? To pay attention in this way does not require agreeing with the person, it simply means listening accurately both to the words and to the person behind the words.

1.3. As you get a little accustomed to "noticing the quality of your own listening", can you sometimes notice small judgements, or irritations or impatiences that seem to creep in from nowhere? For example, finding your yourself silently disapproving of his pronunciation, or of her not having done her homework, or of his getting the answer wrong, or wishing she would hurry up and be correct. Can you catch yourself (very subtly) wishing a student was a bit different from the way he is?

1.4 Do you notice occasions when you feel you listen well? How do you know that? Do you notice that the quality of your listening can sometimes affect the quality of the speaker's speaking? What makes this possible? Maybe outer conditions (such as the location, noise, time of day) contribute, but you can also listen well when outer conditions are not so favourable. (Underhill, 1999:133)

## APPENDIX 2

### Reflections on listening

Listening--really listening--to students is critical to the student/teacher relationship, for knowing their teacher is interested in what they are saying, makes students feel cared about and emotionally connected to school. Since research shows that feeling connected is requisite to students' motivation to learn, showing that we listen is important not only as a matter of kindness, but also as a motivational strategy. (Diane Walker )

Open your eyes/ Open your heart/ Open your mind. Then open your mouth.  
(anon.)

Nature gave us one tongue and two ears so we could hear twice as much as we speak. (Epictetus)

Hearing is simply the act of perceiving sound by the ear. If you are not hearing-impaired, hearing simply happens. Listening, however, is something you consciously choose to do. Listening requires concentration so that your brain processes meaning from words and sentences. Listening leads to learning. Most people tend to be 'hard of listening' rather than 'hard of hearing'. (University of Minnesota at Duluth Student Handbook)

Listening is a skill. It's not just a matter of picking up sounds; active listening involves an array of behaviors that express your attention, empathy and respect. (Elizabeth Pantley)

White man listens to talk, native man listens to think. (anon.)

When we listen, we foster the skill in others by acting as a model for positive and effective communication. (Susie Michelle Cortright)

In seeking wisdom the first step is silence, the second listening. (Ibn Gabirol)