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### Citation for published version:

Sangster, P & Anderson, C 2009, 'Listening as textual and social practices: a study in English classrooms' *The Journal of Reading, Writing and Literacy*, vol 1, pp. 27-45.

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Publisher final version (usually the publisher pdf)

### Published In:

*The Journal of Reading, Writing and Literacy*

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# Listening as textual and social practices: a study in English classrooms

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## Abstract

*This article sets out key findings from a study of listening practices in classrooms. The study involved extensive observation of the work of 10 classes, interviews with the 10 teachers whose classes were observed and with 40 students from these classes. Findings are framed within current conceptualisations of literacy and the literature review draws attention to points of commonality in interpreting written and oral texts. Informed by a sociocultural approach to literacy and a transactional model of communication, the article highlights the complex sets of interpretative and social practices involved in listening within classroom contexts, drawing attention to the importance of knowledge of text genres, the norms that govern listening and the impact of students' wider social identities.*

## Background and Introduction

### *Listening – a neglected area*

When reviewing the research literature on listening four main areas for consideration emerge. The first relates to the complex relationship between listening and language acquisition and development, the second to the central importance of listening to learning and communicating in our daily lives, the third to the amount of time we spend on listening in our working lives and the fourth to the fact that at each stage of our educational development listening is the main 'channel' of instruction (Wolvin and Coakley, 1993). Hoag and Wood (1990) found that although listening was perceived to be the most important language skill it was the most neglected at all levels of education. Reporting on an extensive study of 99 teacher-training colleges and universities, they noted that very few student and lecturer respondents could remember receiving direct, focused, structured teaching of listening skills at school. In addition, listening pedagogy and practices received the least curricular time in the Language Departments of the teacher-training institutions compared to reading, writing and

talking. Indeed the oral skills of talking and listening were afforded markedly less curricular time than reading and writing. They concluded:

Listening researchers and supportive evidence contends our language educational system is upside down and is contrary to communication practices and needs. The skills needed most (listening) in life are taught the least, while the skills used the least (reading) are taught the most ... Children who know how to listen will become more literate because they will be capable of applying those life-skills most demanded of them – to listen. Language lecturers are in a pivotal position in determining what pre-service teachers ultimately teach in the classroom. The call here is to teach teachers how to teach listening. Those teachers will teach children how to listen. (Hoag and Wood, 1990: 12)

### ***Bringing listening into the mainstream of literacy research***

Previous research into listening has focused on the individual listener's cognitive and affective processing of verbal and non-verbal messages, the role of long-term and short-term memory and the significance of cognitive schema in receiving, attending to and interpreting messages (Wolvin and Coakley, 1993). These studies have given us a much richer understanding of the nature of listening. Their focus on the cognitive processes employed by individual listeners, however, has meant that important features of listening in the social and cultural contexts of classrooms have received little attention. For example, the question of how teachers and pupils, (as opposed to cognitive psychologists), construe the nature and demands of listening and the ways in which these conceptions may impact on classroom activities have not been explored in any depth. There is also a dearth of observational work concerned with detailing the listening practices that children engage in within classrooms.

We set out in this article to begin to address these gaps by first noting in the following literature review the changes that have occurred over the past few decades in the ways that reading and writing have been conceptualised and point up the need for our understanding of listening to follow a similar trajectory. The move within psychology from an exclusive concern with individual cognitive processing to a broader sociocultural account of learning is considered, along with parallel changes in definitions of literacy. Attention then turns to the matter of how the relationship between text, interpreter and context is viewed within reader response theory and genre theory. The shift from

transmission to transactional views of communication and classroom processes is explored and the implications of this shift for the study of listening are drawn out.

We then move to present key findings from a study of listening within classroom contexts that has approached communication in transactional terms and been guided by a sociocultural approach to learning, literacy and development. The article concludes by summarising insights from the study in an heuristic model of central aspects of listening practices within classrooms.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Sociocultural perspectives on learning***

Starting off on this review of how broader definitions of both learning and literacy impact on our understanding of listening, it is necessary first to indicate precisely how sociocultural accounts of development have been employed within this study. As subsequent sections will reveal, distinctly different facets of listening emerged from our research. To provide an appropriate interpretation of this complex picture, there was a need to draw on three differing foci of concern that can be discerned within sociocultural writings on learning: discursive practices/'tools' for thought; social transactions that shape learning; and a wider cultural and societal perspective. The focus on how particular discursive practices shape our perception and interpretation of the world and on how specific cultural and semiotic tools impact on learning pursued by scholars such as Wertsch (1991; 1998) has a particular relevance to the study of listening. In contrast to accounts of listening which depict it principally in terms of generic skills that can be applied across context and content, it can be argued that more attention needs to be given to the interpretative practices that learners can draw on in their aural encounters with particular texts. This theme is pursued later in the article in relation to how teachers introduced students to the interpretative resources that allowed them to tailor their listening to the demands of different genres of texts.

Work, guided by Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), delineating the types and patterns of social transactions that can support learning provides clear, general pointers on how best to 'scaffold' students' listening (e.g., Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976; Bruner, 1986; Rogoff, 1990). At the same time, however, it needs to be acknowledged that the concentration in many of

the studies of adult scaffolding of children's learning on supportive, pedagogical moves may have led to insufficient attention being given to the discursive framing of children's actions. In relation to listening, we have shown that it is necessary to keep in view both the dynamic, supportive transactions between teacher and students and the ideational framing of their efforts (Anderson and Sangster, 2006).

Listening also always occurs within particular settings that bring their own social demands, norms for communication and patterning of interpersonal relationships. In line with those researchers who have examined how learning is enabled or constrained by wider cultural practices and the social structures and norms of specific institutions (e.g. Engström, Miettinen and Punamäki, 1999), we have been concerned to explore the ways in which listening is *embedded* in the social life of classrooms. From interview and observational data we have been able to delineate central features of the norms for communication that prevailed in the classrooms we studied and their associated structures of participation in listening and talk (Sangster and Anderson, 2009).

### ***Literacy: the shift from an individual to a sociocultural perspective***

While early definitions of the term tended to be narrow and were articulated simply as the ability to read and write, current definitions share with sociocultural psychology a focus on the situated nature of learning and its reliance on specific discursive practices and semiotic resources. The following quotation from Gee captures well the trenchant attack that has been made on traditional, individualistic definitions of literacy and the move to views that emphasise how literacy is socially defined and sustained:

The traditional view of literacy as the ability to read and write rips literacy out of its sociocultural contexts and treats it as an asocial cognitive skill with little or nothing to do with human relationships. (Gee, 1990:23)

Literacy is now no longer viewed as a unitary phenomenon, but rather is seen as covering a varied and complex range of cultural practices. In addition to moving the social and cultural nature of literacy to the centre of the stage, more recent definitions have emphasised the interrelationships of reading and writing with watching, speaking and listening. For example, the formulation of the Australian Literacy and Language Policy Group (cited in Cairney, 1995) defines literacy as:

The ability to use written information and to write appropriately in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society. It also includes the recognition and use of numbers and basic mathematical signs and symbols. Literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening, reading, viewing, writing and critical thinking. (Cairney, 1995: ix)

As a marker of this move to a broader definition of literacy, many authors have chosen to use the expression 'literacy practices' since it recognises that there are many literacies, that literacy is crucial to much social activity and that it is interconnected with other cultural practices and specific contexts. Literacy is embedded in culture and contributes to the shaping of it (Cairney, 1990a, 1990b, 1995). In line with this shift to defining literacy as 'part of the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values and beliefs' (Gee, 1990), it is appropriate to employ the term *listening practices*. The term 'listening practices' conveys a move away from a unified and individualistic characterisation of listening to one which stresses differentiation in action in relation to cultural purposes, discursive practices and social contexts.

Guided by these sociocultural perspectives, much of the research on literacy since the early 1980s has investigated how it is used as sets of cultural tools to construct symbolic meanings and to engage with others. This developing understanding of the ways in which literacy is shaped by both cultural tools and social contexts has been informed by the work of the genre theorists.

### **Genre theories**

In everyday usage, the term genre is understood to refer to a specific type of writing. The term has commonly been employed within literature to describe texts as belonging to a certain group with which they share common features. Within scholarly discussion of the topic, however, the definition of what constitutes a genre has proved to be a slippery and contentious matter. Harrison and McEvedy (1987: 74) have provided a definition which focuses on the structural features of a text and follows fairly closely the common usage of the term: 'by genre we mean the overall structuring of the text which characterises different forms of communication.'

In contrast, advocates of the 'genre-based' approaches to writing development, such as Collerson and Christie, draw attention to the social

purposes that are pursued in a particular class of text. Collerson uses the term to refer to 'a social process which has some purpose' (Collerson, 1988: 12). These socially purposive genres, it is argued, arise within and are shaped by a specific culture and constitute 'any staged and culturally purposive activity leading to the creation of a text... to serve different social purposes' (Christie, 1990: 12). Definitions such as these which stress the social purposes and cultural context of genres, bear a close resemblance to Halliday's use of the term register. Halliday (1978:8) describes register as referring 'to the fact that the language we speak or write varies according to the type of situation.'

The controversy over the definition of genre led Gunther Kress (1982: 73) to adopt the following position: 'I have used the term 'genre' in a quite non-technical and non-specific way: *mode of writing* might have been a better term'. In a later discussion of this controversy he noted that:

Genre theory in education is not, at this stage, a highly unified body of theory. The contributors to this debate represent a significant range of distinctive positions. The debate ranges from the position which treats genres as fully determined in all essential characteristics and therefore as outside the scope of effective individual action, to positions which treat genres as relatively fluid structures, subject to actions of socially located individual agents. (Kress, 1989: 67)

This reveals a fundamental disagreement that may impinge on classroom practice. Those teachers who, explicitly or implicitly, adopt the first position must be teaching pre-existing, fully determined forms within which there can be no variation, whatever the social context. Those who take the second will acknowledge that students, as they read and write, are dealing with relatively fluid structures and thus should construct their meaning according to their sense of the social situation. We will turn later in the article to describe how these contrasting positions played out in the day-to-day practices of the teachers whom we observed in our study. It should be noted that debate over the nature of genres and the appropriate teaching of genres has tended to centre around texts in written form. Focusing on listening draws attention to the fact that this debate also very much applies to texts that are encountered through listening and watching.

### ***Insights from literary theories***

The debate over the definition of genres brings into view the nature of the texts that are the focus of listening. At the same time, however, one needs to keep in mind the listener's own interaction with a text and the interpretative resources that he or she brings to this encounter. In considering the listener's own sense-making encounter with a text, it is helpful to keep in mind the ways in which the role of the reader has been conceptualised within recent literary theories. A main thrust of the influential *reader response* approach to literary criticism has been to represent reading as a dialogic process where individuals respond to texts, creating different meanings as a result of their own unique experiences, prior knowledge and beliefs (Thomas, 1998). In the words of an early and central exponent of this approach, 'the meaning of the text lies in the activity of the reader' (Fish, 1970).

Sharing the view of the reader as an active interpreter of text, Karolides (2000) has stressed that readers are not spectators but active performers with the text. From a constructivist perspective on learning, he argues that the literary work exists in the *transaction* between the reader and the text. He also employs the term transaction to point up the process of interactive exchange between reader and text as the act of reading unfolds. In a similar vein, Rosenblatt has described the need to move away from accounts which portray reading and texts as distinctly separate:

In discussion of the reading process, as in different disciplines, we need to free ourselves from unscrutinised assumptions implicit in the usual terminology and in the very structure of our language. The usual phrasing makes it difficult to attempt to do justice to the nature of the actual reading event. The reader, we can say, interprets the text. (The reader acts on the text). Or we can say, the text produces a response in the reader. (The text acts on the reader). Each of these phrasings, because it implies a single line of action by one separate element on another separate element, distorts that actual reading process. The relation between the reader and the text is not linear. It is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other. (Rosenblatt, 1995: 16)

Reading is thus defined by writers such as Karolides and Rosenblatt as a *transactional* process; and it would seem appropriate to view the act of listening to spoken texts or media as characterised by a similarly



entwined relationship between the listening 'reader' and the voice(s) of a text.

The writers featured in the preceding paragraphs have not only viewed reading as a transactional relationship but have also tended to stress the uniqueness of each reading transaction as an event in time. This emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual's specific, temporally located reading or listening transaction needs to be balanced, however, by a consideration of the shaping effects of the interpretative practices that are brought to bear in these transactions. The mediating effects of the discursive resources and practices that are instantiated within individual encounters with a text have been fore-grounded within poststructuralist theories. A guiding theme throughout poststructuralist writing has been the argument that people take on specific discourses through which they (and others to whom they relate) shape their world. These discourses are acquired and employed within particular social contexts and relationships with others. As Gee notes:

Texts and the various ways of reading them do not flow full-blown out of the individual soul; they are the social and historical inventions of various groups of people. One always and only learns to interpret texts of a certain type and in certain ways through having access to, and ample experience in, social settings where texts of that type are read in those ways. One is socialised or enculturated into certain social practice. In fact, each of us is socialised into many such groups and social institutions.  
(Gee, 1996:89)

### ***Transmission vs. transaction***

The powerfully mediating effects on talk and understanding of specific sets of discursive practices are not readily captured within a transmission model of communication. The purposes of education that seem to flow from a transmission model of communication have also been trenchantly attacked. For example, in 1992 Gordon Wells suggested that one of the main reasons for the failure to recognise the importance of spoken discourse was that the predominant model of communication in education has been one of information transfer and he discussed the two main pedagogical styles identified by Barnes in 1976 – transmission and interpretation. The former, according to Barnes, put the emphasis on pupils' ability to reproduce information while the latter was much more concerned with interactive discourse and cognitive processes. The transmission theory, Wells (1992: 289) argued, is completely

incompatible with an emphasis on knowledge construction and cognitive interaction.

Thus while it is true that one function of a text is to enable the listener to reconstruct the speaker's meaning as accurately as possible, there is a second and equally important function, which is to provide for the generation of new meaning as the listener makes sense of what the speaker says by responding to it in terms of his or her existing knowledge and current purposes. It is in this second 'dialogic' function that the text acts as what Lotman (1988) calls a 'thinking device'... since traditionally it has been the transmissional function which has dominated discourse in the classroom, the balance now needs to be shifted with much more attention being given to the dual function.

In addition to pointing up the limitations of transmission dominated discourse, the quotation above draws attention to the differing functions which texts can play within classroom (and other social) exchanges. It draws on Lotman's (1988) recognition that texts can play both transmitting and 'dialogic' functions, i.e. to 'convey meanings adequately, and to generate new meanings' (see also Wertsch, 1991: 73-75). This is a more nuanced understanding of the roles of texts and of their interpreters than that presented within reader response theory; and it has been deployed within our own study of listening practices within classrooms. We will return later in this article to illustrate how the teachers in our study acted to employ texts as 'thinking devices' for engaged listening and the construction of understanding.

Turning from the transmissional or transformative functions pursued in educational encounters to focus on the *processes* of exchange, a strong challenge has been mounted on central assumptions of the transmission model of communication. Theorists who are guided by a transactional perspective have rejected the view of communication as a unidirectional, univocal transmission where one can make clear-cut distinctions between sender, recipient and a fixed message. In contrast to a conception of communication as involving the transfer of information, they place the creation of meaning at the centre of the process (Stewart, 1973).

The following quotation from Rhodes brings out well how listening is conceptualised within a transactional perspective on interpersonal communication:

As I listen, I simultaneously 'speak' to you with my non-verbal responses, and periodically provide you with verbal responses. As you speak, you simultaneously 'listen' to the non-verbal messages, periodically tune into the verbal messages, and continuously adapt your communicative behaviours according to your assessment of the extent to which you feel you have been understood. Rhodes (1993: 32-33)

Engaged listening is thus portrayed as integral *throughout* the process of meaningful communication. If neither communicator listens, understanding or misunderstanding, agreement or disagreement cannot be communicated. Indeed Rhodes concludes that 'any single message, then,' [where listening has not occurred] reflects only one perspective, not a perspective shared by both of the participants.' At the same time, he argues that both communicators listen to themselves.

The transactional view of communication expounded by writers such as Wertsch (1991; 1998) has been strongly guided by a Bakhtinian perspective on language and action. For the purposes of this review, it is appropriate to highlight three key aspects of Bakhtin's account of language in action. For Bakhtin the successful sharing of meaning requires inter-animation between different voices. It involves effort by the listener as well as the speaker to bridge the gap between them. In his own words: 'To understand another person's utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. *Any true understanding is dialogic in nature*' (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 232). The participants in a dialogue jointly engage in the effort to achieve simultaneous understanding (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 217).

Bakhtin emphasises that this very active sharing of meaning is a context-sensitive process, where individual utterances are grounded within both local and wider contexts of talk. He notes how 'any utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication' and 'utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another' (in Wertsch, 1991: 52).

These contextually grounded utterances are also framed within 'speech genres' and 'social languages' that carry established systems of meaning and ways of interpreting the world. As commentators such as Wertsch (1998:54) have highlighted, for Bakhtin producing meaning and creating utterances entails a process of animating these cultural formations with one's own understanding and expressive intentions.

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. ... [the word] exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other peoples intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (Bakhtin, 1981:293-4)

Within Bakhtin's account of language in action, it is recognised that this process of individual appropriation of knowledge and interpretative practices of a local culture is not necessarily a straightforward matter (Wertsch, 1991):

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin, 1981:294)

These concerns with the inter-animation of speaking and listening voices, with the contextual grounding of individual acts of listening and speaking and the mediating role of specific discursive practices very much guided the study to which we now turn.

## **Overview of the study**

The study focused on exploring the listening practices that occurred within the social and cultural contexts of classrooms where students were being taught English. In taking this exploration ahead there was an attempt to avoid any pre-formed conceptions of what listening in these settings might entail. The main thrust of the study was thus to construct a bottom-up picture of the 'listening' that occurred. This involved investigating both teachers' and students' perspectives. In pursuing this central research question of what listening practices occurred in these settings, it was necessary to consider:

- what demands for listening were placed upon students,
- which purposes they were meant to achieve in particular communication contexts and
- the extent to which they 'bought in' to or resisted these purposes.

In addition it was important to delineate how students' listening activities were scaffolded by teachers and by their peers.

These research objectives were pursued by:

- observations of on-going work of 10 target classes of 11 or 12 year old students,
- more focused observations of lessons that were explicitly designed to enhance the listening capacities of students (informed by analysis of teachers' planning documents),
- focused interviews with the 10 teachers whose classes were observed,
- focused interviews with 40 students, 4 drawn from each of the 10 classes.

The observations and interviews took place in different types of schools, rural/suburban/urban; public/independent), and there were distinct variations between these schools in the socio-economic background of their students. The schools were located in the city of Edinburgh in Scotland or within its surrounding area.

A key feature of the research design was the decision to observe teachers who had a reputation for being highly skilled practitioners. Observing such a group allowed us to delineate the nature of this 'skilled' practice and to gain a sense of what students *could achieve* in listening within classrooms. As able and thoughtful practitioners these teachers also proved capable of commenting in a reflective manner on listening and provided us with valuable insights. Clearly there are limitations as well as advantages associated with this sampling decision; and very considerable caution needs to be exercised in generalising from the practice of a group of expert teachers in one geographical area, with its own cultural traditions, to a wider population. While the *specific* activities and intentions that featured in these classrooms may not be evident elsewhere, observing and interviewing in these classrooms has alerted us to central purposes, demands and norms associated with listening that are likely to have some generality.

Moving to other aspects of the research design and conduct of the study, a detailed statement of the approaches taken to observation, interview and the analysis of data can be found in Sangster and Anderson, 2009,

which also provides a discussion of the perspective taken on questions of validity and reliability; and the actions taken to ensure that the research was trustworthy.

### **Central findings of the study**

The following summary of key findings of this study sets out to give a sense of the multi-faceted nature of listening within these ten classrooms. It points up the *ideational* and *interpersonal* (Halliday, 1978) aspects of listening and their interrelationships. Attention focuses first on the *ideational framing* of students' listening encounters with different genres of texts and then moves to an analysis of the *norms of listening* and response that prevailed in these settings. Finally listening is considered in relation to issues of social identity and identification in classrooms.

### **The ideational framing of students' listening**

The students in the classrooms we observed were asked to listen to a wide variety of texts of contrasting types. There was also variety in the listening activities associated with these texts, and the teachers took care to ensure that the activities allowed students of differing levels of abilities to participate and develop their understanding. Texts were selected and listening tasks designed with an eye to engaging student interest and participation.

Interviews with the teacher participants revealed what they saw as key matters in scaffolding students' listening. These included ensuring that students were aware of the distinctive features associated with specific genres of texts, the underlying structures of these genres and the ways in which different communicative purposes impacted on listening.

All were alert to the fact that different texts placed different kinds of demands on students and that some students found particular genres more demanding than others. Most indicated that they believed students found listening to imaginative fictional texts, with their strong narratives, considerably easier than listening to non-fiction texts. Several reasons were offered to support this position. It was argued that students have traditionally been taught to read using narrative fiction, and thus from an early age have become familiar with, and have internalised, narrative structures. They suggested that long familiarity with fictional genres marked by powerful narratives could exert a strong 'pull' which would support students' listening as they engaged with tasks associated with

narrative fiction. The following quotation illustrates how teachers expressed this concept of 'narrative pull':

*We're carried along with the familiar pattern of stories and we know roughly what to expect. (Teacher 3)*

Not all imaginative texts, however, were considered to be equal in terms of difficulty. It was also noted by several teachers that poetry, because of its unpredictable structures and complexly interwoven ideas, could prove particularly challenging for pupils:

*They would probably, and this is probably to do with habituation – they probably find a poem quite hard [to listen to] because poetry tends to be elliptical, it's a puzzle. (Teacher 10)*

It was not the case that all teachers concurred with the view that students found it easier to listen to imaginative fiction. For example, Teacher 7 noted that in certain circumstances students might find it easier to listen to non-fiction texts. This initial position was qualified as she went on to observe that the degree of text difficulty and the nature and quality of teacher scaffolding were important factors in determining students' success in listening to both non-fiction and fictional texts. Irrespective of text type, the majority of teacher participants suggested that listening to/watching a film or broadcast, with its supporting visual content, was easier.

There were thus some differences across these ten teachers in their ratings of the listening challenges posed by different types of texts. However, these teachers were united in the care that they took to ensure that their students were prepared to meet the listening demands posed by individual text genres. The observations of their practice showed that, prior to listening activities, students were alerted to the distinctive features, purposes and underlying structure of the type of text that they were about to encounter. At the same time teaching about the markers and purposes of individual genres of texts was not presented as a prescriptive, simplistic framework of identification and interpretation. Students were also analysing and responding to texts within which genre boundaries were blurred. Great care was taken in their lessons to ensure that students understood that many texts did not fit neatly into one single genre or another; rather, several genres could be blended together, apparently seamlessly, into a text. The teacher participants in this study could not offer a clear-cut rationale for their actions in framing students' understanding of genres which was informed by knowledge of the

different theoretical positions in the debate over genre reviewed earlier. Nevertheless their day-to-day practice in devising and introducing appropriate listening activities demonstrated their implicit understanding of, and efforts to address, the complexities associated with teaching about genre.

The manner in which knowledge about text types and purposes was conveyed also needs to be highlighted. Knowledge about specific genres was not presented as a template to be straightforwardly copied but as a resource for students to use in taking ahead their own interpretation of texts. Students customarily were encouraged to arrive at their own sense of what devices had been employed in a text to what effect.

### ***Students' accounts of listening to texts***

The interviews with the students showed that there had been clear communication of the interpretative demands associated with listening in these classrooms. Students talked of the ways in which these teachers assisted them to establish clear purposes for listening and to explore the forms, functions and effects of particular texts. In addition they described how the teachers scaffolded their listening by cueing them into the markers of specific genres of text. The following account by a pupil of a series of listening tasks illustrates one of the means by which students were directed to attend to distinctive features of text genres:

*Well, the first one – we were to listen for – to Little Red Riding Hood, the story, and see how the story was different from the tape version – that was the poem and see how it had been changed. We had to do that in groups and discuss it and see what the differences were. So the listening – well, the group work was listening, listening to each other, and listening to see – to see if we could see – hear the difference between the story and the poem – and see – hear what the – things were that told us if it was a story or a poem. (Student 21)*

Familiarising students with a range of genres and cueing them to attend to distinctive textual features, allowed them to adapt their listening once a text was recognised to be within a particular genre frame. The same student, when discussing how she framed her listening within this classroom episode, noted that:

*I wasn't expecting the poem – but as soon as I realised that it was the same story – well, nearly the same story but in a different –*



*genre – I just changed my listening to – to listen to a poem rather than a story. Your brain sort of thinks, ‘This is a poem’, so you know what to expect. This a story – so you know. It was all Little Red Riding Hood so I knew what was coming. (Student 21)*

Another example is provided beneath of how students described activities that teachers had designed to direct their attention while listening to the distinctive features and purposes of texts. The participant tells how he tackled a task which required him to listen to (or listen to and watch) a series of short texts in order to (a) identify the genre of the text, and (b) explain how he performed this identification:

Student I knew some of them right away, they were really easy. There was the poem, the news, the weather [report] – the story, and the play, and ...

Interviewer And how did you know what kind of text you were listening to?

Student Well, you – we’ve had lots of them so we’re really used to them. So I know poems and stories and plays and stuff like that. But the ad[vert] was harder ‘cause it took – because first it was like a story but then you knew that it was really selling you something. (Student 35)

This response demonstrates that the student has at least a degree of awareness of the fact that some texts do not fall neatly into one genre or another; and, as in the case of the advert, they may play with the listener’s expectations by blending one or more genres into the same text.

Almost all of the student interview participants recognised the importance of being able to identify the genre or genres of the text they were listening to, indicating that such an act of identification allowed them to tailor their listening to the demands of the text. In the following quotation the student explains how familiarity with the form of stories has established expectations that guide listening activity; and he notes how the presence or absence of ‘templates’ of text types and purposes has a significant impact on the nature of his listening:

Student Like with the story, you just know what stories are like. With the facts – well, you know sometimes but sometimes there are no clues, so it just all sort of comes at you and – it’s hard to listen and make sense. You’re

trying to sort out what it is and you just can't seem to get it right.

Interviewer And if you could sort out what it was would that help you to listen better?

Student Yes. It would. 'Cause then you could think, 'This is a story.' 'This is something with lots of information.' 'This is a, an argument, so different points of view, like with writing an argument', so you'd know exactly what to – exactly how to listen. (Student 26)

This response also displays the student's metacognitive knowledge both of the demands of the task and of his own activities as a learner, as he describes his attempts to monitor his understanding and direct his purposes.

### ***Narrative pull***

The effect of text type on affective engagement and ease of listening also emerged as a theme within the student interviews. In line with the expectation of the majority of teachers in the study, most student participants stated that they found it easier to listen to imaginative fiction, in particular short stories and novels, rather than to non-fiction texts. Different reasons were offered for this response. In common with the teacher participants, most of the pupil accounts of this matter centred on the narrative pull that a fictional narrative can exert over a listener's attention. This sense of the power of narrative to hold and drive forward attention was captured vividly by one student within the metaphor of the "flow" of stories:

*... So there's a flow in stories and so it makes it easier to listen to, you know, like a river with a current, you just get taken along with the flow. It's powerful. (Student 32)*

This idea of being drawn into stories and allowing them to exert their 'pull' as one empathises with the characters and their predicaments is captured in the following extract, where the student's familiarity with the narrative features of conflict and resolution are expressed with wry humour:

*We just tune into the story and let ourselves go into it. You wait for the next thing that's going to happen to the characters and think,*

*"How are they going to get themselves out of that, I wonder?"  
(Student 4)*

### **Listening to interpret texts**

Many of the student participants articulated clearly the ways in which they framed their listening to focus on the underlying structure of a text, and how prior knowledge of such structures helped them to achieve this. Their accounts at the same time revealed that they had assimilated sufficient metalanguage to conduct an informed discussion of the texts they were listening to and watching.

In addition, the majority of students indicated how their teachers had alerted them to the ways in which the demands of audience shaped the form, content and language of texts. Most could discuss the specific techniques used in texts they were listening to – and watching – and several could engage in incisive, detailed analysis and evaluation of how such techniques were deployed.

The following extracts from Student 3's interview exemplify how some study participants had internalised the points of interpretative practice that their teachers had communicated and were able to deploy these practices in an appropriate and flexible fashion. Student 3 reflects in these extracts on his own listening during a task in which he had been asked to compare and contrast the techniques used in two different speeches: Martin Luther King's celebrated *I Have A Dream* speech and one made in the film *Philadelphia* by a lawyer in defence of his client, another lawyer who had been sacked when his employers discovered that he was HIV positive. The student describes how he attempted to adjust his listening to meet the demands of the texts and the purposes set by the teacher, and differentiated his listening activity according to the different techniques that were being used.

*I usually just watch films and don't think too much about how it's done. But she wanted us to think about how it was done and listen to that. So I did that and I paid attention. Martin Luther King used all the things that the lawyer used to get his message across but his was a speech – but the lawyer was from a film, for entertainment. Martin Luther King wasn't for entertainment, it was really serious stuff; but the film was entertainment and serious as well. So I was looking at what they said and how they said it in all of them.*

*So there was more in the speeches than just the idea, we need to, need to look at how they said it and the techniques – and most of the time both are important. I listened in the same way and in different ways when I was listening for the different things – same for the things they were saying, but different for the techniques, I think. (Student 3)*

The quotations above and similar extracts from other interviews indicate how students were being inducted into specific interpretative practices in listening. Rather than the focus being simply on the 'message' contained within a text, students were being assisted to listen in a more differentiated fashion, giving attention to the structure, techniques and purposes of a text. As we have noted earlier, listening was also differentiated in the sense of being adapted to respond to the nature and demands of *specific* genres of texts. Thus the listening practices that were being fostered in these classrooms could not be captured readily in any notion of 'generic skills', applied irrespective of text and context. Similarly the findings do not support a unitary view of the metacognitive control of listening but highlight how the self-regulation of listening that was expected in these classrooms required students to have the cultural tools to interpret particular kinds of texts. One can also argue that providing students with the tools to interpret texts and experience in using these tools changed the nature of their listening. By being enabled to attend in a conscious fashion to the form, purposes and effects of a text, as well as its content, the students were engaging in a *qualitatively different* listening experience.

## **Norms of listening**

### ***The teachers' expectations***

The ideational framing of students' listening encounters with different genres of texts was enabled by the presence in these classrooms of a normative order which stressed the responsibility to listen and respond in an engaged, interactive manner. The teacher participants in their interview accounts, (and in the practice we observed), placed central emphasis on the quality of the social relationships and transactions that occurred in classrooms. The teachers' talk about classroom transactions revealed that they viewed listening very much in normative terms. They expected students not only to engage fully and readily with classroom listening tasks but also to adopt an appropriate way of interacting with peers that demonstrated respect for others and for their opinions. (It was acknowledged, however, that many students – and indeed many adults –

may find it difficult to adopt and sustain such actions.) At the same time they saw themselves as having the responsibility both to embody and to model intellectually and socially responsive transactions that displayed attentive listening. In addition, they recognised an obligation to engage students' attention by offering motivating tasks, accompanied by clear instructions. The teachers were also exercised by the question of how best both to deploy and downplay their authority to create a more open interactional order in the classroom.

### ***Listening and responsible interaction***

The students who were interviewed were in the main well aware of the normative demands placed on them as 'listeners' and participants in classroom interactions. Looking first at the norms concerning appropriate action in groups, students were able to give an explicit account of the obligations to listen to:

- guide appropriate turn taking,
- show engagement in the discussion,
- be responsive to others,
- take others' ideas seriously,
- curb one's own expressiveness to contribute to the collective effort,
- achieve clearer personal understanding.

While some students indicated that they could find matters such as curbing their own expressiveness for the collective good problematic on occasion, there was wide acceptance and endorsement of this set of values. Students' talk in interviews described how teachers had not only communicated the expected norms of group listening and response but also provided a rationale for following these norms. They also portrayed their teachers' actions in modelling exactly how these norms applied to day-to-day group discussion.

In the following quotation, for example, there is an account of a teacher acting to instil the twin values of displaying respectful attentiveness and intellectual responsiveness to others.

*She wanted us to understand why we were listening. She also wanted to teach us that by listening we can learn a lot of things*

*and by responding to what people ask you and helping people and talking to them and listening to them and giving them respect of what they're saying and not saying, 'Well, that's wrong', because that's not what my idea is. You should think, 'Well, that's a good idea as well, it may not be my idea but it's someone else's opinion on what it is. That's their idea or their opinion, it's not mine.'* (Student 7)

The following extract reveals how an interview participant appears to have appropriated the norm of engaging with close attention to fellow students' contributions. In addition to displaying how this norm has been incorporated into the student's own experience, the quotation gives a glimpse into the frustration that could be felt when one's perceived right to have one's contributions attended to and recounted accurately was breached.

*You've got to have quite a good memory with listening in the groups so you can remember what every person has said and you've got to try to get it right ... there's this guy in our group and he says: 'And X said ...', and I didn't say that at all, he got it wrong, so that's important with listening 'cause it's a bit annoying.* (Student 26)

### **Exploratory listening**

Some students recognised that if they wished to have their own contributions treated with respect, they had to provide a comparable degree of attentiveness and responsiveness to others. This insight comes across very clearly, for example, in the next interview extract. The extract also serves to illustrate the way in which commitment to norms of responsive listening and participation enabled a close *exploration* of a topic and the construction of new understandings.

*The group, I definitely prefer that. I like to listen and share ideas and learn and sort out then what I think about something. Sometimes it helps me to sort out what I'm thinking if I haven't made up my mind yet about something. I like to say what I think as well and try to get over my point of view to the others. I try to treat it seriously so that they treat what I say seriously as well.* (Student 12)

It is important to point up that the students whom we interviewed were on the whole not only taking on board the need to display attentiveness and responsiveness to others but also to adopt a questioning stance towards

the ideas that were being discussed. For example, the requirement to adopt a questioning approach was recognised by Student 13 who trenchantly stated that ‘a good listener doesn’t just lap up what you’re saying and take it as it comes.’ Active engagement with, and analysis of, others’ ideas featured strongly in some student accounts:

*Sometimes I’m not too sure about something and it helps me to listen to other people’s ideas and opinions so I can sort it out for myself. I mean, I don’t just listen to their ideas and think to myself, ‘Right, that’s the answer’, but I think to myself, ‘Right, she thinks this and she thinks that so are they right or not or partly right and partly wrong and what do I think, what’s my opinion?’ (Student 21)*

The following quotation brings into view the fact that such analytical listening may involve more than a single focus of attention. This student has an understanding that it entails not only attention to the content of a message but also to the tasks of *evaluating* the content of the message and the speaker’s intentions.

*When you’re listening to other people you’re thinking about what they’re saying and why they’re saying it and how good an idea it is and things like that. (Student 7)*

The norms of responsive, engaged group interaction described by the students were very much in evidence throughout the observational part of the study; and many of the group episodes observed were characterised by an open, questioning examination of a text or topic. As they were engaged on listening tasks, students asked questions of one another; sought clarification; hypothesised; paraphrased; synthesised; and challenged and refuted in ways which encouraged exploration of ideas, topics or problems. Group-based listening tasks were also often designed to encourage a synthesis of ideas and/or joint decisions. This process of synthesising the ideas that have emerged in discussion is described well by Student 28:

*... and you get to hear other people’s ideas and so it’s better – and we make decisions when we’ve discussed something and we put all our ideas together and see what we came up with at the end.*

In summary, central features of the listening and participation in groups in these classrooms can be represented in Mercer’s analytical category of *exploratory talk*, where “partners engage critically but constructively

with each other's ideas ... *knowledge is made more publicly accountable and reasoning is more visible in the talk*. Progress then emerges from the eventual joint agreement reached" (Mercer, 1995:104, italics in original text).

### ***Displaying appropriate listening performances***

The student interviews not only revealed their understanding and endorsement of the norms concerning attentiveness and responsiveness to classroom peers, but also their sense that they needed as listeners to signal this attentiveness clearly. In the words of one student, 'I try to make sure there's an interested look on my face.' Peers' gestures and bodily orientation were also 'read' for the presence, or absence, of appropriate attentiveness:

*... if they are smiling and looking kind of questioningly at you, you would know that they're waiting to hear what was going to be said next. (Student 22)*

*You can tell just by looking at them. They look as if they're listening. (Student 10)*

Given the predominantly cognitive focus of the literature on listening, this facet of listening that is concerned with the presentation of self and social orientation to others has been rather overlooked. It therefore seems important to highlight the role that the display of appropriate listening performances may play in the social and intellectual life of classrooms. On this theme it is also worth noting that a few students made observations that revealed at least some understanding of the fact that listening performances and the interpretation of listening performances might not always be straightforward matters:

Interviewer: And would you know just from looking at somebody if they were listening to you?

Student 33: Not really. Because they could be doing something else.

### ***The responsibility to adopt an attentive mindset***

As a separate matter from norms concerning listening as the display of responsiveness to others, the students whom we interviewed had gained a clear sense of their responsibility to adopt an attentive mindset within classrooms. The talk of some students suggested that they had



internalised this obligation and that it was driving their actions in class, as the following quotations illustrate:

*I try to pay attention. Concentrate. Not let myself get distracted, try to understand what I'm listening to. (Student 3)*

*I was definitely thinking, 'Right, OK, I have to get down to business. I have to listen to this to get the information.' (Student 12)*

### **Students' views of good teaching practice and teachers' responsibilities**

Set against students' acknowledgement of their own responsibilities in listening, most recognised that there was a great deal that teachers should – and could – do to help them. Interesting and motivating tasks; a wide range of texts; engaging topics; variation in types of listening; different media; explicit purposes for listening; models of good listening actions, (from teachers and video); and a significant increase in opportunities for, and practice in, listening in English and other curricular areas were highlighted as factors which could help them to improve their listening. In addition, several students indicated that changes in both the quantity and quality of interactions with teachers could prove particularly beneficial, with a shift in focus from addressing whole classes to interacting with individuals and small groups.

The central role of the teacher in helping students to progress in their listening was thus endorsed by most participants. Many, however, noted that teachers had responsibilities beyond providing interesting and relevant tasks and interacting more frequently with students. For example, the following extract from Student 13's transcript foregrounds the obligation of teachers to ensure that their messages are well tuned to their audiences, since both student understanding and freedom from face concerns in the classroom are dependent on the quality and clarity of such messages:

You really need to make sure that people understand what you're saying. People don't want to seem stupid and say, 'Please Mr. Bloggs, I don't understand what you're saying', because they think that everyone will laugh at them and say, 'Ha, ha, you don't know what you're doing, you're stupid,' but they're not stupid, it's just that they don't understand.

Other students expressed an expectation that when classroom interactions fail because students have not understood teachers' messages, teachers should be prepared to increase their efforts. Aside from this expectation of commitment to establish a common ground of understanding with students when communication was problematic, some students saw teachers as having the responsibility to anticipate the possible difficulties that learners might encounter and scaffold students' learning to avoid such difficulties.

The preceding paragraphs have set out student expectations that their teachers would adopt a learner-focused approach to communication that would facilitate listening to achieve common understanding and reduce face concerns. Teachers were also seen as having the responsibility to act proactively to enable students to improve their listening. While students had this general expectation that a teacher would act to progress their listening capacities, and in general accepted her or his authority within transactions, some students discussed, (and in the observations demonstrated), their willingness to resist the teacher's improving role on occasion. For example, Student 22 in exploring this theme commented that:

*I think it can be quite different because you think the teachers are trying to improve what you do, but sometimes you think that you're more right so you don't tend to listen [to the teacher] as well as you do to other people.*

This observation resonates with the teacher participants' concerns that, on occasion, they might try to exert too much authority in transactions with students and their need to be vigilant about how their authority was being deployed. The students acknowledged that, at times, they had the confidence to decide that their own opinions and those of their peers were more acceptable than those of the teachers. Students' accounts therefore portrayed some situational variability in their perceptions of whether teachers' utterances warranted their close attentiveness.

### **Social identity, language and listening**

The interviews with this group of students revealed not only their beliefs concerning rights and responsibilities in relation to listening, but also their sense that one of the main determinants of the success of their listening was the quality of interpersonal relationships in the classroom. In particular, they described how listening and participation were enabled by close relationships with peers marked by trust and an absence of face

concerns. Many students commented on the beneficial effects on their listening of being in groups in which they could simply relax and 'be themselves'. Knowing group members well, being able to anticipate possible reactions and being comfortable in a group had a considerable impact on their feelings of confidence in their ability to listen and contribute appropriately. For example, student 27 discussed the feelings of security she experienced when friends were in close proximity during interactions:

*'Cause she's like – just sitting next to me. And I know her. We know each other and I don't have to – I can be myself 'cause she knows what's happening and she feels the same about things as me.*

Several students also indicated that they preferred discussing in smaller friendship groups, not only because they could readily identify with friends both personally and socially, but also because they shared a common discourse for such interactions. Earlier extracts from student 21's interview have illustrated how she was being guided to attend in her listening to distinctive features of text genres. While this student was coming to frame her listening within the interpretative practices modelled by her English teacher, a shared discourse within her classroom group still facilitated her listening:

*They speak to me – the way they say things is the way I say things so they're easier to understand – they use the same words as me. And – and they know how I'm feeling, don't they, 'cause they know me better. Well, I mean the teacher knows me but not in the same way, so it's easier with my friends. The words – the language they use is the same as me so it's easier. Like in some subjects the teachers use language that I don't really know and I find it hard to listen 'cause I don't know what they're talking about. And also – my friends know what's going on in my life and they know when I'm depressed or something and they know how to handle me then.*

One can see from this extract how the student's identity within the classroom was inextricably linked to the social context of the group in which she has a personal knowledge of the other participants, shared past experiences and a shared language for interaction. She felt excluded in some curricular areas, (although this feeling did not apply to all to English lessons), because teachers employed discourses within which she could not operate. The language used by her friends,

however, included her within the social transaction. Her account of her classroom experience resonates with the theme that has been foregrounded in the literature on social literacies (e.g. Cairney, 1995; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000) of how dissonances between the discourses of schooling and the language practices of a child's community may impact on both learning and social identity within classrooms.

Set against these notes of dissonance between school and community discursive practices, the student interviews also revealed the endorsement by students of social values that were consonant with listening norms and practices in classrooms. Goodnow's (1990) work has drawn attention to how the value associated with a skill in a given culture may impact on children's investment of self and action in that skill. For this group of student interview participants, listening was viewed as a general social obligation. In the words of student 4:

*It's important to listen to what's being said ... in school, at work, listen to your friends and that ... it's important that they know you'll listen to them and that they'll listen to you when you need to talk.*

It is also interesting to note that when discussing instances where they believed they had listened particularly well, almost all students referred to the kind of therapeutic listening which characterises interactions with close friends. It was seen as an obligation to listen to friends' troubles with accurate, empathic attention. This acceptance of the need to display close attentiveness to others as a general social responsibility can be regarded as supportive of the specific types of listening encounters that teachers wished to foster in their classrooms.

### **An heuristic model of listening practices in classrooms**

The literature review in this article has argued that, consonant with the re-conceptualisation of literacy that has taken place in the last few decades, there is a need to move from regarding listening as a unitary skill to a more differentiated understanding of listening as involving culturally and contextually grounded sets of practices. The article has also been guided by a transactional view of listening, marked by the inter-animation of hearers' and speakers' participation in communication or of a hearer's interaction with the voice(s) of a text. It has highlighted that listening in English classrooms involves not simply the acquisition of information from individuals and media but the interpretation of texts. In addition, some of the complexities associated both with understanding

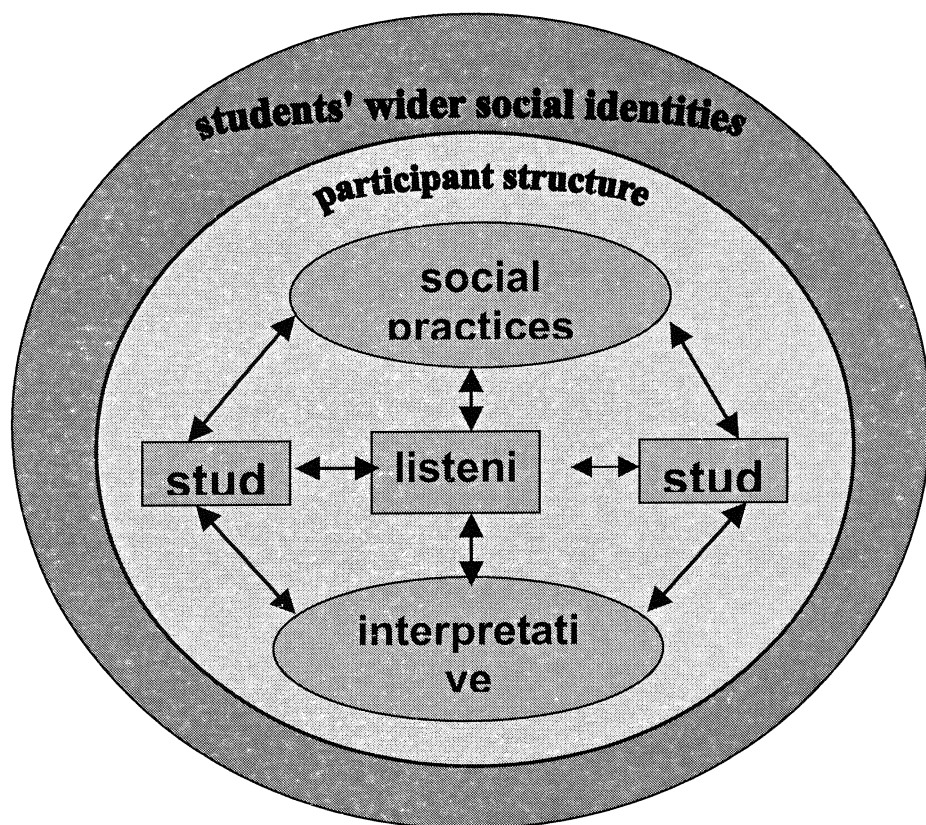
and with taking ahead these acts of textual interpretation have been considered.

The preceding pages have given a summary picture of the key elements of the listening practices observed in a particular set of English classrooms. It would clearly be inappropriate to claim any straightforward empirical generalisation from the *specific* patterns of activity and the values actuating listening that were evident in these classrooms. A view that stresses the culturally and contextually grounded nature of listening also needs to recognise that the demands and traditions of different school subjects may have associated with them differing sets of listening practices. At the same time, however, it can be argued that delineating the listening practices in classrooms where the teachers had the reputation of being accomplished practitioners is in itself of value and interest. Looking in fine detail at the 'listening' which occurred in these settings and at participants' portrayal of listening has also brought into sharp focus *general* features of classroom listening practices. It has allowed a more differentiated picture of listening to emerge, with attention being given to different ways in which listening can be viewed:

- listening as activity
- ideational/interpretative practices of listening
- interpersonal norms of listening and social interaction
- listening as social performance
- listening within the participant structures of classrooms
- listening and wider social identity.

These features are summarised in the model presented in Figure 1, which is intended to serve as a tool for reflecting on listening within the day-to-day life of classrooms and to highlight matters which have received less attention in preceding research on listening. This model sets out to capture both the ideational and the interpersonal aspects of listening within classrooms and the interconnections between them. The model highlights how listening in classrooms is mediated by interpretative practices. On this theme, the article has depicted central elements of the discursive practices in listening that were fostered within the English classrooms in our study, with the ideational framing of listening being differentiated to respond to the nature and purposes of different genres of texts. Following these practices also required a

reframing of the object of students' attention from a focus solely on the 'information' conveyed in a text to a wider concern with the techniques, structure and purposes of a text. Thus students were being encouraged to take a different epistemological stance towards texts. They were being assisted to move away from regarding texts only as conveyors of meaning and messages which they needed to receive, towards viewing them as objects, artfully constructed for a purpose, which they needed to question.<sup>1</sup> Coming to view and engage with texts in this way also involved *being* a particular kind of questioning, active interpreter. Observation in this group of classrooms showed how the teachers were skilfully scaffolding this set of differentiated listening practices; and interviews with the students revealed that they possessed a meta-language within which to discuss listening purposes and textual demands.



Looking beyond the confines of this study, its findings point up the need to delineate within individual disciplines/subjects key interpretative practices that students are expected to display when listening to teachers' discourse, peers' talk and texts. They also draw attention to the question of how students can best be introduced to, and encouraged to participate in, a subject's interpretative practices.

The model also highlights the social practices that frame the nature of listening activities within classrooms. Interviews with the student and teacher participants in our study revealed that they very much saw listening in normative terms and allowed us to discern their nuanced conceptions of rights and responsibilities as listeners and the particular normative order that they believed should govern acts of listening and response. Observations showed that participants' views concerning the norms that ought to govern attentiveness were not simply an 'espoused theory' but were largely enacted in everyday classroom interactions. Whereas much of the preceding literature has presented listening in coolly cognitive terms, our study has brought into the foreground the fact that student participants felt an obligation to display active listening performances, presenting themselves and orienting to others in an appropriately attentive fashion. Commitment to the norms of responsive listening and engaged participation, coupled with a classroom ethos where student voices were respected and encouraged, created a structure of participation that fostered exploratory listening and the construction of new understanding. The normative order of participation thus created the grounds for students' participation in the literary interpretative practices that they were encountering in these classrooms.

The model in addition brings to notice the ways in which students' social identities within and outwith of classrooms may impact on their listening within schools. A focus on social identities in relation to listening leads to a consideration of how attentiveness and participation may be influenced by the degree of consonance or dissonance between the discursive practices of a student's community and those of schooling, and by the value attached in the wider society to a particular skill or area of study.

Viewed as a whole, the heuristic model encapsulated within figure 1 conveys the need in both research and everyday practice to have a wide focus of attention on listening within classrooms, where one examines the ideational/discursive framing of students' listening efforts, the norms for communication and structuring of interpersonal relationships and the

ways in which listening is enabled or constrained by social identities and wider cultural values. In situating listening within specific interpretative and normative practices, it moves away from conceptualising it as a unitary set of skills to provide a more differentiated picture. It also moves attention away from a narrow concentration on individuals' listening capacities to consider how the intellectual and social context of the classroom impacts on students' struggles and successes in attending to texts, peers and teachers. Taking this wider view of listening allows teachers to have a more clear-sighted appreciation of students' difficulties and to consider a range of ways in which engaged listening can be encouraged and understanding of a particular school subject fostered.

### Note

1. This observation is prompted in part by Sam Wineburg's discussion of the differences between high school students' and professional historians' epistemological orientation towards historical primary sources (Wineburg, 1991).

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