An evaluation of Rost's course book *Strategies in Listening* for the teaching of listening strategies in relation to what we know about listening strategies and their development

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[1. Introduction. Listening strategies in the light of theoretical developments in the field of listening in the last two decades]

Richards (1983.219) viewed the listening skill as consisting of "component micro-skills" and he listed thirty three of them which he considered to be basic requirements for conversational listening. A comparison with other more recent lists and taxonomies of skills, sub-skills, learning strategies, listening strategies, metacognitive processes, and elements to include in a listening course compiled by other commentators indicates that there is broad agreement regarding what the listening skill consists of. For example, Richards micro-skill no.22 "the ability to use real world knowledge and experience to work out purposes, goals, settings, procedures" was mentioned the most frequently, appearing in nine of the ten lists surveyed and micro-skill no.12 "the ability to guess the meanings of words from the contexts in which they occur" was mentioned eight times. It should be pointed out that Goh categorizes both no.22 and no.12 under "strategies that do not always work".

However, it is not so much *what* the listening skill consists of which caused disagreement but rather *how* it should be learned or taught. Richards believed that, matched against a learner's specific needs, (1983.227) "learning experiences" could "be planned as a result of systematic identification and operationalization of listening micro-skills". In this way, he suggests that listening skills will develop when suitably broken down and graded into more manageable sub-skills. He doesn't actually state how input and tasks will develop micro-skills, though he implies that narrowing the focus of attention may aid sub-skill acquisition, presumably by freeing attentional capacity for the sub-skill in question.

Others disagreed with this atomistic approach to skills acquisition. Sherman (1994.31), for example, cited in Tonkyn (2000.49), presumably preferring a more holistic approach, says it is the "flying time", or quantity of exposure, not the "systematic coverage of sub-skills" that leads to progress in the listening skill. In contrast, Field (1998.112) claims that in the same way that "more reading does not lead to better reading", neither does more listening lead to better listening.

Rost (1990.155) agrees with Richards in some ways particularly with regard to the need for the learner to have "recurring encounters with increasingly challenging language" or what Field would define as "flying time". However, in contrast to Richards, in Tonkyn's words (2000.10), he does not "advocate the teaching of separate sub-skills, but rather the development of the more global skills" which "will automatically and more naturally bring the sub-skills with them". In support, Rost (1990.150-151) points to evidence from research

into skills by Welford (1968) that sub-skills are best practised in clusters and to a "lack of empirical data to suggest that skills are developed in linear sequence". He gives phoneme discrimination as one example of a sub-skill that would best not be treated separately, implying that some exercises in Richard's listening course *Listen for It* (1987.40) are not worthwhile.

Furthermore, not only does he believe that micro-skills should not be treated in isolation but he also believes that the listening skill should not be treated in isolation either. Ideally, the development of the listening skill must include (1990.156) "a growing initiative on the part of the learner to interact with... other speakers". This is not to imply that Richards did not recognize the importance of the interactive nature of listening, nor indeed that he ignored the importance of global comprehension skills, only Rost places greater emphasis on the relationship between listening and speaking and the value of the more global skills. This view was shared by others including White (1998.6) who, in the introduction to her teacher's resource book *Listening*, stressed that "learning how to listen in a second (or indeed a first) language is inextricably linked with learning how to speak".

Rost's avoidance of a segmentalized approach could also be explained by his teaching situation, or his experience of teaching English at college level in Japan for around two decades. His listening course book *Strategies in Listening* is specifically aimed at developing listening skills in high beginner to lower intermediate Japanese students. School level programmes of English instruction in Japan aim to develop linguistic competence through emphasis on grammar-translation thereby neglecting communicative competence and listening and speaking skills. For learners trained in this way there is no clear difference between translating and reading, and listening becomes a more complicated extension of this process wherein individual words are first decoded from spoken discourse before being translated into L1. Only on completion of this process can meaning be constructed.

As Chamot (1989.421) points out: "listeners who interpret meaning based on the linguistic characteristics of the text are using bottom-up processing". Since listening requires the listener to process spoken discourse in "real time" it is hardly surprising that reliance on bottom-up skills, especially in listening comprehension, is generally seen to typify the ineffective learner. However, it would still be risky to trust too much in assumptions regarding what Japanese college level learners (or any low level learners) *are* doing based solely on the particular emphasis of their background in English education.

[2. How strategy training came to be viewed as important in second language acquisition]

Since Richards wrote his 1983 review there has been a shift in focus away from the content of the learning programme towards a greater focus on the learning process and the learner himself. One way in which this shift of focus manifested itself was in what Skehan, cited by Ellis (1994.529), described as an "explosion of activity" in the study of learner strategies. Listening comprehension came to be viewed as an active process in which, in the

words of Buck (1991.67) "...listeners attempt to construct an interpretation which is meaning-ful in the light of their own assessment of the situation, knowledge and experience".

While Richards also stressed the importance of strategy training, not only did he recommend their development through isolated micro-skill practice, but his findings were mostly based on how native speakers processed spoken discourse. In fairness, he admits that a lack of sufficient data on listening in second language acquisition at the time of writing left him with no alternative. However, since 1983, research into the learner's strategies underlying his "attempts to construct meaning" has been conducted most influentially by O' Malley and Chamot, but also by Rost and Ross, Vogely, Goh, Buck, NJ Anderson and Vandegrift. Learner data thus gathered helped to deepen understanding of the precise nature and number of strategies used not only by good, or successful and effective learners, or GLLs, but also by ineffective or bad learners (BLLs). The latter had been largely ignored by earlier researchers in the field, Rubin (1975), Naiman (1978), and Wesche (1979). What emerged was a more detailed picture of what learners are doing, rather than a prescription of what they should be doing according to analysis of native speaker discourse. Having identified these strategies, discussion was directed towards the issue of how to develop the listener's communicative competence and proficiency through strategy training and guidance.

[3. A definition and evaluation of learner strategies]
Rost provides the following simple definition of listening strategies, which is also partly applicable to learner strategies in general, in the teacher's manual of *Strategies in Listening* (1995.5): "Listening strategies are ways of thinking and acting in order to understand better". In addition, Chamot (1999.7) offers "procedures or techniques that learners can use to facilitate a learning task" as a further definition of learning strategies. She continues: "Learning strategies instruction can help students of English become better learners". Through developing their metacognitive awareness of strategy use, such as planning and monitoring their own performance, our students, Chamot presumes, will become more confident, motivated, autonomous, involved in the learning process, and ultimately successful. Goh (1997.368) supports this view in stating that some students "lack knowledge about how they can learn more effectively" and suggests that an approach which allows for unsuper-vised, or non-directed learner development is unsatisfactory. Furthermore, if we fail to provide our students with strategic knowledge, as Sheerin (1987.126) and Field (1998.111) point out, our listening comprehension instruction will be confined to providing practice in, or only testing, the skill, rather than teaching it.

The argument is persuasive but most attempts to arrive at a generally accepted descrip-tion of learning strategies have also been unsatisfactory. Ellis (1994.529) describes the concept of strategies as a "fuzzy one" and he categorizes them into three types: production, communication, and learning, the latter consisting of language learning strategies and skill-learning strategies. Oxford (1990.16), cited by Ellis (1994.540) further sub-divides learn-ing strategies into direct and indirect strategies. She classifies compensatory strategies,

which are particularly important for low-level learners, under direct learning strategies whereas Ellis (1994.539) notes that others, such as Rubin, view them as distinct from learning strategies.

In my view, compensatory strategies are a class of communication strategies, which, while they may enable the learner to cope with difficulties arising from L2 interaction, may not contribute to learning or gains in the learner's proficiency. Skehan (1996.27) noticed the same phenomenon in task-based instruction where a focus on meaning becomes a priority above a focus on form, and that the learner's developing interlanguage system is not stretched, only the learner's strategic competence.

[4. Are strategies, and listening strategies in particular, teachable?]

It could be argued that lack of clarity regarding the precise nature of strategies should not necessarily deter the teacher from teaching them, especially in the light of the benefits envisaged by Chamot, but there are other problems too. First, Field (1998.115) notes that "it has not been conclusively demonstrated that this kind of strategy training works". This applies particularly to listening. O'Malley and Chamot (1990.185), in a study of high school ESL students, found that, despite encouraging signs in integrative tasks such as listening and speaking, "the size of the effect with listening comprehension was modest". While Rost and Ross (1991.236) found that "training of learners in specific questioning strategies...can influence their immediate comprehension of a text as well", McDonough (1999.9) points out that subjects in this kind of interventionist study, will obviously display the kind of behaviour that they are trained to. The key problems are, as Rost admits, that it is not certain that this kind of training will lead to automatization of strategy in the long-term or that it will have any conclusive effect on the learner's proficiency.

Numerous commentators, including Field and Buck, have drawn our attention to a further problem arising from the subconscious nature of some learner strategies, which are therefore, in the words of McDonough (1999.1), "not available for conscious manipulation or inspection". This is a very serious concern and if we accept it, then attempts to integrate training of some strategies into the teaching of listening, or any other skill, may not be worthwhile. At best, we could be content with a view, expressed by Anderson, cited in Ellis (1994.533), that consciously applied strategies can pass from a cognitive stage through an "associated stage" before becoming fully automatized and subconscious. In this sense, the teacher could intervene in the learner's earlier stages of development, or lower levels of competence, as Rost strives to do.

One solution would be to identify teachable, or learnable strategies and integrate them into listening skills training, while leaving the development of strategies not available to inspection or manipulation to natural processes. However, considering the present inconclusive state of research, as Ellis (1994.557) warns us, we have no way of knowing what combinations of strategies should be taught nor which strategies should be taught for which type of task.

These difficulties are compounded by the complex nature of the listening skill, where strategy use is even less available to inspection, and by extension, training, than in other skills. For example, McDonough (1999.8) points to the "limited degree of control by the listener on the stream of speech" as one complicating factor, and the fact that there are so many additional factors to those already involved in reading comprehension. However, Vandergrift and Anderson (1996.10) point out that an awareness of these additional difficulties "therefore requires the use of learning strategies such as comprehension monitoring, analyzing, purpose-identification, and guessing". In other words, rather than de-emphasize listening strategy training, we should increase our efforts to include it in listening comprehension instruction.

Finally, strategy use may depend more on other factors for example personality, social-affective factors and motivation. First, regarding personality, Field (1999.116) reminds us that strategy use is a very individualistic thing which varies from learner to learner. Second, Bacon and Finneman, cited in McDonough (1990.9) suggest that strategy use is governed by "the affective climate of the classroom" and an atomistic approach to strategy training is not therefore relevant. Third, learner performance may be significantly influenced by motivation. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) cited in Ellis (1994.542) discovered that "the degree of expressed motivation was the single most powerful influence on the choice of language learning strategies".

To sum up, while there is a strong argument in favour of promoting strategy awareness in learners, before we integrate listening strategy training into programmes of language instruction in the way that Rost has attempted, the following should be born in mind:
-problems related to the precise definition and categorization of these strategies
-the issue of whether or not they promote learner proficiency
-lack of evidence to support the effectiveness of listening strategy training
-the subconscious nature of strategy use, particularly in listening
-the complexity of the listening skill
-the fact that other factors beyond our control may be more important in governing their use.

[5. An evaluation of *Strategies in Listening* and its programme for strategy instruction]

For all that has been said on the theoretical front, the similarities between this work and Richard's *Listen for It* significantly outnumber the differences. However, the two courses differ in two key ways. First, in keeping with his views on the teaching of listening comprehension detailed earlier, Rost does not include exercises aiming at the development of specific micro-skills in isolation. Second, his aims, as stated in the Teacher's Manual are to (1995.3) "provide direct practice with listening strategies" and he integrates into the course a series, or mini-syllabus, of twelve listening strategies. No summary of general listening strategy aims is provided other than to "focus students' attention on meaning". However, they appear to train the learner to do three things:

1. Develop top-down processing techniques while decreasing reliance on non-directed bottom-up processing of text.
2. Develop global listening skills, including the ability to cope with incomprehensible input.
3. Encourage the learner to ask questions to seek clarification, and to manage and engage in interactions.

Firstly, regarding bottom-up and top-down processing, we begin with a definition from Eysenck and Keane (1995: 2). "Bottom-up processing refers to processing directly affected by stimulus input, whereas top-down processing refers to processing affected by what an individual brings to a stimulus situation (e.g. expectations determined by context and past experience)". Anderson and Vandegrift (1996.10) comment that we need both forms of processing in order to construct meaning from spoken input. However, as mentioned in section 1, many low-level learners, especially in Japan, rely too much on bottom-up text processing, and, as Chamot noted, this affects the learner's ability to process text effectively. Rost seeks to redress this perceived imbalance and his first aim is to shift focus from one form of bottom-up processing, namely attempting to decode every word, to a more directed, selective one. This is reflected in the following three strategies: no. I "don't worry about unclear sounds", no. 4 "pay attention to stressed words", and no. 11 "focus on key words and facts". However, if a particular learner is showing progress by processing larger chunks or phrases, recommendation that he focus on key words or stressed words instead might hinder his development as a listener.

Furthermore, key words may be perceived by the learner as unclear sounds. This is related not only to the issue of personality traits and the extent to which they influence what students worry, or don't worry about, but also to the more important problem of the development of the learner's proficiency. As mentioned earlier, the learner's desire to transfer incomprehensible input into comprehensible input is essential in the development of the learner's proficiency and should not be ignored when attempting to raise the learner's level of tolerance to incomprehensible input.

Young (1996), cited in McDonough (1999.9), suggests that the way the learner deals with unknown words, is crucial in listening comprehension. He found that some, presumably effective, learners were "able to hold on to an unknown word while using subsequent lines of the passage for identification cues while others", presumably BLLs, were "blocked". Likewise, Rost (1990.157) defines listener development strategy in terms of a "movement from identifying non-understandings as a general non-understanding of the entire utterance... to identifying sources of misunderstanding". While he has correctly identified the importance of the need to infer and the need to tolerate ambiguity, and has provided strategies to promote them, whether or not strategy training in this area will produce positive results will depend to a large extent on individual learner differences.

Nevertheless, use of top-down processing techniques, viewed by Chamot to typify the effective learner, is emphasized through the following strategies: no. 2 "think about the situation", no. 7 "try to understand the speaker's purpose", no. 8 "predict what the speakers

will say", no.10 "try to understand the speaker's attitude" and no.12 "focus on conversation themes". While bottom-up processing may be involved, these aim both to provide alternatives to exclusive, non-directed bottom-up processing and to activate stored knowledge of the world, human relationships, situational or functional schemata, or special scripts for situation-specific knowledge. This will be important for global comprehension. For example, in unit 1 exercise C Rost aims to activate learner knowledge of what may or may not be involved in filling in a membership application for a video club by posting the following listening strategy at the top of the page: "Predict what the speakers will say". In this way, learners are advised to "listen to", or apply maximum processing energy to, parts of the text which differ from their expectations. In other words, an approach to listening which involves filling in gaps in anticipated situation-specific scripts.

However, the ability of the listener to activate knowledge and consciously direct it towards the task, while clearly important, may not be as important as the ability to readjust inaccurate predictions when things go wrong. As Buck (1994.163) says: "there is a strong tendency for listeners to have expectations, which aid comprehension when met, but can interfere badly when not". While we can train learners to predict, training them to rapidly readjust predictions is possibly beyond the range of strategy instruction. Furthermore, O' Malley and Chamot (1989.429) found that "in general, the effective listeners seemed to be listening for larger chunks shifting their attention to individual words only when there was a breakdown in comprehension". This kind of attention shift is likely to be effected subconsciously and ways of training the learner to be more flexible in strategy use is another major challenge. While we can point out strategies of individual word focus on the one hand and top-down processing of text on the other, interplay between the two is something the learner will probably have to develop alone.

Finally, Rost's attempts to realise his goals of integrating the teaching of listening and speaking are embodied in two key strategies: no. 3 "ask if you don't understand" and strategy no.6 "give a quick response". Both Rost and Richards designed tasks which invite the learner to choose the most suitable response to spoken input. However, as mentioned in section 1, Rost places greater emphasis on integrated skills instruction and he includes a recording featuring a series of eight functional expressions geared to eliciting a response and the recommended strategy is to "give a quick response". This is direct strategy practice and the product of training is more observable. Asking questions for clarification is also promoted and this is especially important in view of the cultural preference for non-interactive listening here in Japan.

To sum up, Rost's twelve strategies appear to be adequate for their purposes and, as with Richards' micro-skills, they generally show a strong correlation with items from other lists and taxonomies. Rather than suggest improvements, I would instead suggest caution both in their application and against any excessively optimistic assessment of their value.

[6. On the importance of strategy selection and learner autonomy]

Strategy selection is a very important issue for the learner and a further, more important shortcoming in Rost's course can be identified here. Goh (1997.362) observes that "strategic knowledge is.. knowing which strategies are likely to be effective in achieving learning goals". To be more precise, students need practice not only in the application of strategy but in making decisions regarding choice of strategy. In this way, if our aims in teaching listening strategies are to encourage autonomy and to provide learners with ways of compensating for incomprehensible input in real life interactions, at some stage in the course students should be invited to make choices about which strategies will likely be effective in which type of task. This may also involve developing in the learner an awareness of the extent to which focus on individual strategies is suited to them personally both with regard to their own strengths and weaknesses as listeners and their own personality traits.

Rost does include questionnaires entitled "Self Evaluation" at the end of the two review tests on pages 42 and 79, but there are problems here too. These do include page references to listening strategies check units where strategy descriptions can be found. However, the simplistic nature of the questions "Which strategies are helping you listen better?" and "Which strategies do you want to try using more?", with reference to the preceding paragraph, may mislead the students into thinking that they are required to broadly apply strategies in the same way irrespective of task and text type, and listening stage.

[7. Conclusion. Some implications of the above for the learner, teacher, and course book writer]

It is clear that all should be doing more. The Teacher's Manual should include checklists of sources of possible comprehension difficulties in each task to provide the basis for micro-skill activities as strategy training. Preferably, it should also include a list of recommended remedial sub-skill activities such as those listed by Field (1998.114). However, it is likely that Rost would not agree, given his position on the separate teaching of sub-skills detailed in section 1. Field (1998.117) also raises the issue of prognostic and diagnostic teaching of strategies. He concludes that "major strategies involving the creating and checking of inferences are best modeled - incorporated into the pattern of the listening lesson - rather than taught individually". However, I feel that there is still a case for Chamot's full five phase CALLA instructional sequence, with both organized pre-task strategy presentation and a clear plan for remedial action if problems arise.

As for the learner, movement towards autonomy should involve more effort to design their own tasks, to activate their own background knowledge, without prompting from the teacher or course book, and to monitor their own performance. In addition, movement towards proficiency should involve an effort to deal with language form coupled with a desire to decrease reliance on compensation strategies. Under these circumstances, a well-motivated, metacognitively focused learner might not appreciate reductions in quantity of exposure to spoken input, or Sherman's "flying time", due to overemphasis on strategy work.

Nevertheless, *Strategies in Listening* may prove effective in developing the learner's strategic view of listening, or developing awareness of strategy use. This heightened awareness may or may not lead to improved ability to process spoken input. Either way, the issue of whether or not it will improve the learner's overall proficiency remains the key consideration. Rost and Ross (1991.263) conclude that "instruction in strategy use is... essentially 'marking time' until the learner achieves greater proficiency" but improving their compensation strategies may "lead the learner to toward understanding more of the target language as a system". Furthermore, as Ellis (1994.559) notes, an effective strategic approach to listening may not be the cause of proficiency gains but the result of them. All things considered, it seems certain that, as Field (1998.117) points out, "strategies... are strictly compensatory: as the listener's listening ability improves they are required less and less". Finally, since we have no powerful evidence to indicate how we should go about strategy training, nor even to prove it has any value in the first place, anything goes. In this sense, Rost's approach to listening strategy training in the course is largely defensible.

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