

LISTENING: THE MOST DIFFICULT SKILL TO TEACH

Natasha Walker

Manchester Metropolitan University

Abstract

With listening skills usually requiring a considerably long period of time to acquire, normally involving the student experiencing a variety of emotions ranging from depression and frustration through to exhilaration and pride, teaching listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks that a teacher faces. The following article evaluates contemporary research with the aim of dissecting and discussing the reasons why the teaching of listening skills seems to be so complex and consequently intends to report upon possible suggestions for improving listening competence in the second language (L2) classroom. Through the consideration of the difficulties encountered when undergoing listening, as well as the evaluation of various strategies and exercises suggested to facilitate the acquisition of listening skills, such as *Dictogloss*, *Listening from the middle* and *Discovery Learning*, this research highlights the important place that the teaching of listening strategies should be ever increasingly assuming in the modern foreign language classroom.

Key words: teaching, listening skills, modern foreign languages, Dictogloss, Listening from the middle, Discovery Learning

Resumen

La adquisición de la comprensión auditiva lleva mucho tiempo y normalmente somete al estudiante a una gran variedad de emociones, desde la depresión y la frustración hasta la alegría y el orgullo, por lo cuál es la enseñanza de la comprensión auditiva una de las tareas que entraña más dificultad para un profesor. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo evaluar estudios recientes sobre el tema con el fin de por una parte examinar y analizar las razones por las que la enseñanza de la comprensión auditiva suele ser tan compleja, a la vez que, por otra, proponer sugerencias para mejorar la comprensión auditiva en una lengua extranjera. Al tener en consideración las dificultades con las que nos encontramos cuando escuchamos una lengua extranjera, así como la evaluación de una variedad de estrategias y de ejercicios sugeridos para facilitar la adquisición de las destrezas de comprensión auditiva, como el *Dictogloss*, *Listening from the Middle* and *Discovery Learning*, este trabajo destaca el papel importante que la enseñanza de las competencias de comprensión auditiva deberá tener cada vez más en las aulas de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras claves: la enseñanza, las competencias de escuchar, lenguas extranjeras, Dictogloss, Listening from the middle, Discovery learning.

1. The forgotten skill

It seems that, for a long time, the skill of listening didn't receive adequate acknowledgement as a skill in its own right, but rather was long "regarded as a passive skill, [...] an ability that would develop without assistance" (Osada 2004:53). Such lack of regard for developing listening skills may seem quite absurd when according to Burley-Allen (in Flowerdew and Miller 2005:22-23) more than forty percent of our daily communication time is spent on listening, with thirty-five percent being dedicated to speaking, sixteen percent devoted to reading and only nine percent of our daily communication being occupied by writing. It was only really at the turn of the 1970s that listening comprehension began to be explored (Osada 2004:53), conducing to a shift in listening skills being viewed as a passive skill to being viewed as elements which students should actively acquire. However, with this newly found accreditation having only been proportioned very late on in comparison to the other three standardised language skills (reading, writing and

speaking), listening skills have been rendered the “least researched of all four language skills” (Vandergrift 2007:291). This lack of research means that listening “remains one of the least understood processes” (Osada 2004:53), making the effective teaching of these skills a somewhat grey area, subjecting it to often being viewed as a “somewhat neglected and poorly taught aspect of English” (Osada 2004:57). Furthermore, the very complex nature of the activity of listening also contributes to the teaching of such skills being a rather challenging affair indeed.

1.1 Difficulties encountered when undergoing listening.

To understand better the difficulties in teaching listening, we should begin by identifying the difficulties the student faces when undergoing listening. One obvious obstacle is the fact that “the pronunciation of words may also differ greatly from the way they appear in print” (Bloomfield et al 2010:3). With the acoustics of the spoken language often varying dramatically to the form of the written language, the identification of the words that constitute the oral discourse could prove to be problematic for the student. Likewise, “listeners, unlike readers, do not have the luxury of regular spaces that signal where words begin or end” (Vandergrift 2007:296), meaning that in addition to trying to recognise the words in spite of their unfamiliar pronunciation, students are also trying to decipher which linguistic unit belongs to which word. In addition to pronunciation and the identification of word boundaries, prosodic characteristics of spoken discourse, such as where the stress falls, weak forms and strong forms of words and intonation, also influence the understanding of the oral passage. Furthermore, spoken discourse rarely presents consistently complete sentences, but instead short phrases or clusters loosely strung together (Osada 2004; Field, 2008), in which mispronunciation, hesitation, the rephrasing of utterances, repetition and even the losing track of what is wanting to be said (Field 2008) all play a role in the verbal interaction. Another point to be considered is that the “vocabulary and grammar also tend to be far more colloquial and much less formal” (Osada 2004:59) than what the student may be accustomed to, making for potential confusion should their vocabulary knowledge not be familiar with such expressions, as “an obvious factor that can influence comprehension of a spoken passage is the overlap between the listener’s vocabulary knowledge and the vocabulary of the passage” (Bloomfield et al 2010:12).

Another issue to take into account is that “oral texts exist in real time and need to be processed quickly; when the text is over, only a mental representation remains” (Vandergrift 2004:18). Unlike reading, listening requires instantaneous processing with little or no option to access the spoken input again, making the skill arguably more complex than, for example, reading. Also, “in most cases, listeners must process the text at a speed determined by speakers, which is generally quite fast” (Osada 2004:58), meaning that the listeners can’t normally control the speed at which they must process the delivered discourse. Therefore, the pressure to combat all the structural and grammatical obstacles when deciphering the message of a piece of spoken discourse, combined with, as Celce-Murcia 1995 (in Osada 2004:56) suggests, the fact that students accomplish all this in real time as the message reveals itself makes listening complex, dynamic and fragile.

Sociolinguistic elements of listening, such as the student’s cultural background and the student’s knowledge of the cultural background of the foreign language can also play a significant part in the student’s comprehension of the verbal discourse. As much as culturally-centred vocabulary may impede comprehension, a general understanding of the country’s culture and history can also help to avoid conversational impasses. For example, should a Spanish learner be talking to a native and a comment relating to the Franco era is introduced, a basic knowledge of the main themes of the historical period should help the

learner to make predictions about the content of the spoken discourse, which in turn can effectively aid understanding in the case of any imperfections in the student's reception of the dialogue. To conclude, the concept that "listeners use pragmatic knowledge, which is often culturally bound, to make inferences and determine the speaker's implied meaning" (Vandergrift 2007:298) seems to be a fairly common belief amongst pedagogues, meaning that this aspect should also be considered by the teacher when teaching listening.

In connection to cultural background, regional accents can also affect the spoken message being understood by the recipient, with familiar accents being "easier to understand than unfamiliar accents" (Bloomfield 2010: ii). With most languages, although undeniably some more than others, offering a variety of different dialects, this linguistic feature should also be taken into account when assessing the difficulties of achieving success in listening in a foreign language.

All of the aforementioned factors contribute towards the complex process that the student undergoes whilst interpreting an oral dialogue, making the activity of listening very demanding of the student, who is constantly and simultaneously dealing with multiple dynamics in order to decipher and grasp the message of the spoken discourse. The student is required to "comprehend the text as they listen to it, retain information in memory, integrate it with what follows and continually adjust their understanding of what they hear in the light of prior knowledge and incoming information. This processing imposes a heavy cognitive load on listeners" (Osada 2004:60), which can also be perceived as a factor that "causes them to lose concentration rather quickly" (Osada 2004:61); an obstacle that both student and teacher are faced with. This heavy cognitive load, produced by the natural environment in which listening occurs, in which students must instantaneously and simultaneously retain and disregard information as necessary, whilst also battling with grammatical features, the pronunciation of the spoken discourse, and the speed at which it is delivered, can also lead to anxiety on the part of the student. "Difficulties associated with rate of speech, lexical features and pronunciation are the main sources of stress" (Kurita 2012:39), meaning that teachers should both be aware of these factors and investigate these factors with the student, providing access to the necessary skill set to address potential difficulties which may stem from these obstructions. This high cognitive load, potential loss in concentration, and anxiety can greatly affect the student's overall success in receiving and understanding the verbal interaction, as "if a listener is anxious or in some other way distracted and unable to pay attention, it will be more difficult to accurately determine what was said" (Bloomfield et al. 2010:6).

2. Why teach listening strategies?

Having discussed the problems that the student faces when undergoing a listening exercise, and thus the associated difficulties that a teacher faces when teaching listening, a natural progression would be to examine the listening skills and strategies that the teacher should strive to develop in the student. It is widely accepted that top-down and bottom-up processes are common practice when inferring both written and verbal input. Bottom-up processes call on the student's previously learnt knowledge with reference to lexical awareness and knowledge of grammatical and syntactical aspects of the language, whereas top-down processes draw upon the student's ability to utilise background knowledge that has been gathered and stored from previous experiences to decipher meaning - essentially "it allows us to fill in – by "default" – other parts of the pattern, with related words, images and concepts" (Rost 2006:53). "Strategies are not isolated

actions, but rather a process of orchestrating more than one action to accomplish an L2 task” (Anderson 2005:757), therefore learners are believed to use both bottom-up processes and top-down processes when deciphering a message and “a key issue for the teaching and testing of L2 listening skills is the relationship between top and bottom” (Lynch 2006:92). Through making students aware of these strategies, they can “be trained to listen for *any* word they might recognise and then to guess beyond it” (Mendelsohn 2006:84), which immediately gives them more options, or rather more opportunity for success, than a student who hasn’t been taught these skills and so listens to a verbal passage on a very unextensive and monotonal level. These cognitive strategies are also very closely involved with metacognitive regulation, the monitoring and controlling of one’s metacognition, which could be described as the awareness of one’s own ability to acquire knowledge. ““Metacognition” is often simply defined as “thinking about thinking”” (Livingston 1997). Metacognition has further been categorised to include metacognitive knowledge, which can be described as knowing your abilities, for example a child’s belief that she is better at arithmetic than her friends, and metacognitive experience, which can be depicted as consciously identifying affective experiences, such as the sudden feeling of not understanding something another person has just said (Flavell 1979:906). “Understanding and controlling cognitive processes may be one of the most essential skills that classroom teachers can develop in themselves and the students with whom they work” (Anderson 2005:767), ergo a solid understanding of these metacognitive processes can help teachers to maximise on the student’s acquisition of listening skills such as the ability to use bottom-up and top-down processes when decoding oral input, as they can guide the student into being aware of how they acquire information. Anderson (2005) echoes this previous sentiment by concluding that “the metacognitive strategies play a more significant role because once a learner understands how to regulate his or her own learning through the use of strategies, language acquisition should proceed at a faster rate” (Anderson 2005:766).

In continuation to the above point, it would therefore be logical to assume that teachers should “recognize that they have to concentrate on the listening process rather than the listening test results” (Othman and Vanathas 2004:31). “This shifts the emphasis of listening practice from product to process and the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the student, thereby helping students become self-regulated learners” (Vandergrift 2002). By guiding students towards independently recognising the tools available to aid them in the decoding of a message, students can begin to question and experiment with their own listening process, fine-tuning their reactions to oral input in order to maximise upon the level of comprehension gained.

However, the efficacy of current teaching materials to effectively train students in the technicalities behind the listening process seems to be a rather dubious matter. “Textbooks are in fact not sufficiently applying the theoretical findings [of current research]” (Mendelsohn 1998:95), with most doing “very little to develop metacognitive knowledge through raising learners’ consciousness of listening processes. [Therefore,] It is imperative [for teachers] to teach students **how** to listen” (Vandergrift 2002) through raising students awareness of listening strategies.

3. Raising strategy awareness in the modern foreign language classroom

Strategy awareness can be promoted “by asking students to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies used. Group or class discussions on the approach taken by students can also stimulate reflection and valuable

evaluation” (Vandergrift 1997:406). During these discussions, teachers should heavily focus on encouraging students “to share individual routes leading to success; e.g. how someone guessed (inference) the meaning of a certain word or how someone modified a particular strategy” (Vandergrift 2002). It is then crucial to further support this ever-developing awareness of listening strategies through offering structured practice, where the focus is “on the *process* as well as the product of listening [...] [, thereby] help[ing] students to reflect on their learning and [...] encourag[e][ing] them to consciously adjust their strategies” (Vandergrift 1997:406). Madden (2008) describes one strategy-training activity which he calls *Listening from the Middle* and attributes to the ideas of Mendelsohn (1994, 1995) and Anderson and Lynch (1998) (In Madden 2008). This activity aims to expand upon students’ top-down processing-skills, by getting students to listen to a recorded piece of authentic conversation from the middle and use referential clues from the discourse and background noise to infer information regarding its setting, context, mood and relationship between the interlocutors. Each of these pieces of information can act as indicators to trigger background knowledge. For example, should the setting be identified as one of a school, and the relationship as one between a teacher and a student, previous experience of typical language and conversational subjects that are presented in an academic setting could help students to infer any impasses in the spoken dialogue.

4. Teaching culture to enrich background knowledge

Regarding the background knowledge of the student, it is widely accepted that “language carries [...] cultural information and it reflects the substantial and particular ways of thinking of that people” (Hayati 2009:144). “An important requirement, then, for learning spoken English, is the acquisition of cultural knowledge” (Hayati 2009:144) and as a consequence “there is now, an emphasis in modern language teaching on cultural knowledge as a basis for language learning” (Hayati 2009:144). Teachers should therefore embrace the target language’s culture and include culturally-infused information as part of the course criteria, as “the presence of cultural references is something inherent in any piece of discourse [...] thus listeners’ background knowledge of those cultural aspects will help them construct its meaning as well as acknowledge differences between their own culture and that of the target language so that possible misunderstandings can be avoided” (Usó-Juan and Martinez-Flor 2006:39). That said, choosing the cultural information to include when teaching English can be deemed quite an over-whelming task in comparison to when teaching certain other languages. “The language of Bulgaria belongs to Bulgarian, the language of Dutch belongs to the Netherlands; but the language of English does not belong to Britain any more” (Hayati 2009:150), meaning that teachers must also be acute to the fact that cultural diversity amongst English speaking countries can also play a role when dealing with culturally-specific schemata. Teachers should be encouraged to teach cultural aspects of the language not in spite of but alongside this cultural diversity, “tackling cultural issues as essential aspects that influence listeners’ interpretation of what they are hearing” (Usó-Juan and Martinez-Flor 2006:39). Through an enriched knowledge of the target language culture, top-down processing during comprehension exercises can be enhanced, allowing for greater success in L2 listening. In a study carried out by Bacon (1992) which investigated strategy use amongst almost 1000 university level students of Spanish, it was found that “effective listeners related what they heard to both personal experience and their knowledge of the world” (Bacon 1992:162), thus further consolidating the importance of cultural knowledge in both developing top-down processing and also encouraging progression in L2 listening as a whole.

5. Top-down processing skills vs Bottom-Up processing skills

“While some studies have found that less-skilled readers/listeners are deficient in top-down processing skills, others have contradicted this, citing evidence that, in fact, less-skilled readers/listeners lack bottom-up processing skills” (Tsui and Fullilove 1998:433). Top-down processing skills seem to be a dominant tool when discussing how to improve learners’ listening strategies, however arguments for a more fundamental focus on bottom-up processing skills have also emerged. Students will, undeniably, reach a level in the target language which requires a greater element of accuracy in the comprehension of an oral text than inferential top-down processing skills will be able to offer. “Top-down processing is used by all listeners, it is not the ideal, and we should keep in mind that the learners’ ultimate aim is to rely less on contextual guesswork, and more on hearing what was actually said. Current EFL teaching has tended to overlook this point.” (Wilson 2003:336). One activity that has been developed in order to address this point is a text reconstruction exercise called *Dichtogloss*. Students listen several times to an oral passage, making notes throughout to which they can refer to in the consequent phase, which is one of reconstructing the passage to as close a likeness to the original text as possible. The objective of this exercise is “to demonstrate the guesswork involved in listening and encourage students to adjust their strategies—those who are ‘risk-avoiders’ should make more use of contextual knowledge, and those who are ‘risk-takers’ should learn to check their hypotheses more carefully.” (Wilson 2003:337) This idea was then adapted to give more credence to the identification of students’ listening difficulties, giving birth to the concept of *Discovery Listening*. The first two steps of *Discovery Learning* are practically identical to the *Dichtogloss* process. The first stage – the Listening stage – requires the students to listen once to a complete passage without taking notes, followed by a self-assessment of their level of comprehension, before listening to the passage twice more whilst taking notes. The second stage –the Reconstruction stage– requires groups of students to create as accurate a reconstruction of the text as possible. An additional third stage was then added –the Discovery stage– in order to better highlight the difficulties the students faced during the two preceding stages. In the Discovery stage, students “a. compare their text with the original, and attempt to classify the causes of mistakes; b. assess the relative importance of their errors; c. listen again without reading the text, and assess their performance” (Wilson 2003:337). As a result, it is strongly argued that both *Dichtogloss* and *Discovery Learning* seem to successfully “indicate just how difficult top-down processing can be when bottom-up processing has been inadequate” (Wilson 2003:338), thus bringing the importance of bottom-up processing competences largely into the focal point.

6. Conclusion

First, after examining the linguistic features (pronunciation, word boundaries, intonation, sentence and word stress, etc.), the cultural features (cultural background both of the student and the language, regional accents, etc.) and the psychological features (bottom-up and top-down processes, metacognition, metacognitive regulation, metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive experience, etc.) of the activity of listening, I would concur with Alicia Martinez-Flor and Esther Usó-Juan when they say that “the complexity involved in how these factors affect the listening comprehension act has made the teaching of this particular skill an arduous task” (Martinez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2006:40). I would agree with this statement on two levels. First, on the fact that the effective teaching of listening skills, taking into account the intricacy of these skills, could seem like a rather mammoth, even daunting task. Secondly, because identifying the root of misunderstandings in

listening comprehension could prove to be problematic, due to the wide scope of strategies used and the numerous factors involved in deciphering a verbal message. This sentiment is reflected by Lynch (2006), who states that “the multiplicity of the sources that we normally use to achieve understanding can make it hard to identify which of the many levels is the source of a current problem – for the teacher, as well as the learners” (Lynch 2006:95). Due to this “complexity that underlies this process of listening comprehension, it has been considered the most difficult skill to learn out of the four skills” (Martinez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2006:29), which would lead me to conclude that this complexity would also make listening the most difficult skill to teach.

Secondly, the importance of strategy awareness was discussed and various exercises (*Listening from the Middle*, *Dichtogloss* and *Discovery Learning*) were described as suggestions that could potentially be simulated, or adapted, and used to form a part of a teacher’s blueprint when addressing the effective teaching of both top-down and bottom-up listening strategies. In addition to this, the relevance of cultural background knowledge was considered and its unfaltering inclusion in any language curricula was strongly argued for. Therefore, I would have to first conclude that, “culture and language are inexorably linked” (Hayati 2009:150) and as such should be taught in unison; and secondly, and more focally, I would wish to emphasise that in order for the comparatively poorly researched area of L2 listening to continue advancing with the momentum it has gathered in recent years, “L2 teachers need to know how to teach effective strategies and provide practical exercises” (Aponte-de-Hanna 2012) in order to aid the students towards the successful selection and application of said strategies, with the ultimate, united goal being to transform the students of today into strategy-savvy, independent linguists.

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Natasha Walker is currently situated in Huddersfield, United Kingdom. Her languages of expertise are English, Spanish and German, but she also teaches some French and some Portuguese. She has studied at both Manchester Metropolitan University, England, and The University of Alcalá, Spain. She takes an active interest in teaching approaches and methodologies and wrote her dissertation on the German, activity-oriented method of *Lernen Durch Lehren* (Learning by Teaching).