Second language listening: where are we?

The past twenty years has seen a big shift in the way in which second language listening is viewed, and in how it is practised in the classroom. This article reviews some of these developments.

Understanding of listening as a skill

We have moved on considerably from the rather vague notion of *comprehension* as the goal of a listening lesson. Instead, listening, whether in a first or a foreign language, is now perceived to be a complex skill operating at several different levels, and needs to be practised accordingly (Field, 2008). Listeners have to match the sounds reaching their ears to the phonemes and syllables of the language being spoken; they have to match those syllables to words; they have to group words into grammatical patterns; they have to place each new piece of information in a context; and they have to add pieces of information together to make a line of argument. A good listener is somebody who is capable of operating at all these levels; and a good listening teacher needs to ensure that learners practise all of them.

Importance of word recognition

Past emphasis on comprehension focused attention on right and wrong answers to questions and led teachers to neglect the causes of the incorrect answers – the most important being the inability of learners to recognise words (even familiar ones) when they occur in connected speech. We now recognise that basic perceptual problems of this kind have wide-ranging effects. Good listening practice for teachers now focuses on the features at word and phrase level that make connected speech difficult to follow. These problems are broadly of three kinds:

- Those caused by the short cuts that speakers take when producing speech (leading to changes such as *ten pounds* → *tem pounds*, *next spring* → *neck spring*).
- A result of the difficulty in identifying weakly stressed function words in English (*shoulda done*, *half 'n hour*).
- A result from the fact that there are relatively few gaps between words in connected speech like those that exist in writing (*when to assist her* sounds the same as *went to a sister*) – it is the listener who has to work out where one word ends and the next begins.

The best way of sensitising learners' ears to any of these potential difficulties is for teachers to provide five-minute micro-listening sessions: dictating a set of difficult sequences and asking learners to try to write them down. For examples of many exercise types, see Field (2008).

Role of listening strategies

We have become increasingly aware of the extent to which second language listeners are dependent upon listening strategies – at least up to intermediate level. The strategies are of two kinds. One is narrowly related to the kinds of task we use in the classroom: it involves planning ahead for hearing a recording or using written comprehension questions to anticipate the words used by the speaker. These techniques serve the learner well in class or when taking a formal listening test. However, they have limited value in the real world, where strategies need to be used spontaneously in order to deal with parts of an utterance that have not been recognised or words that are unfamiliar. It is important to train learners to cope with these gaps in what they have been able to understand. This kind of training should not just be reserved for higher proficiency levels; it is most critical at lower levels in order to build confidence and to enable learners to make basic sense of any pieces of authentic speech that they encounter in real life. See Field (2000) for an outline of the kind of listening strategy practice that can be provided to ensure that *risk avoiders* begin to form guesses about what they have heard and *risk takers* check their guesses against what they hear next.

The value of listening tests

It has long been recognised that a major weakness of the way in which we test listening (or check understanding in class) is that it tends to involve other skills. Learners and test takers might have to read complicated comprehension questions or speak or write the answers they give. More recently, there has been concern about the types of thinking that many conventional test formats demand. For example, answering a multiple-choice question involves not just identifying the correct answer, but also eliminating the wrong ones – an operation much more complicated than anything we would normally do in real life listening. The question has also been raised of whether traditional formats (e.g. multiple-choice, gap-filling) test listening comprehensively enough. They tend to focus on a series of discrete points of information within a recording – ignoring the line of argument that links those points. Unsurprisingly, there is new pressure on materials writers and testers to develop formats which represent the full range of what listening demands.

Computer delivery

Perhaps the biggest changes have been brought by technological advances. Until recently, speech quality associated with video material and with computer delivery was quite poor. Today, that is far from the case. Accompanying the improvement in clarity has been a much wider availability of authentic sources of listening material, thanks to the Internet. The advance in sound quality has led to the development of a range of computer based tests, though test designers have yet to exploit the full possibilities of this mode of delivery. There is also likely to be an increasing shift towards the use of video in both teaching and testing listening. Many would say that this would represent a major improvement, in that it provides the kind of context for listening that a real-world situation would offer (facial expression, gesture and a visual environment). However, it is not quite as easy as that: some evidence suggests that adding visual cues increases the demands of a task and may distract listeners from focusing on the words that are being spoken.

Autonomous listening

Another outcome we can expect is a shift away from traditional classroom lessons towards a greater reliance upon autonomous listening practice. There is growing evidence that second language listening is quite an individual process: any teacher will be aware that areas of recording which cause problems for some L2 listeners are completely transparent for others. With this in mind (and thanks to the wide availability of downloadable material), it is increasingly common practice to encourage listeners to work on their own. It might take the form of listening centres within schools, where learners can choose what they listen to and how long they listen to it; or it might take the form of listening homework downloaded on to mobile phones or personal laptops. Task types for independent study might require listeners to listen to a short text, transcribe what they think they have heard and then listen to it again and again, each time adding any more words they have understood. Or they might require listeners to watch a short five-minute video clip several times – first with subtitles either in the first language or in the language being studied and then without subtitles. It should also be possible to move away from conventional comprehension questions focusing on a set of isolated points and instead to ask listeners to produce a brief oral or written summary for their class, based on listening several times to a recording during a homework session.

References and further reading

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