LISTENING COMPREHENSION: DISTURBING REALITIES AND ATTAINABLE DREAMS

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My goal in this paper is to show how listening comprehension tends to be dealt with in many EFL and ESL classes, and then suggest ways in which these "disturbing" realities can be turned into "attainable dreams."

Part One

Disturbing Reality 1: It is still believed by some ESL/EFL teachers that listening comprehension is not a very important skill and does not need to be taught explicitly.

Attainable Dream 1: ESL/EFL teachers recognize the real importance of listening comprehension and commit themselves to teaching it explicitly.

Why is listening so important? When listening, more so than with any of the other skills, the listener is *at the mercy* of the speaker. S/he has no control over what is going to be said, in what manner, and how quickly it is going to be said. The transient spoken words "come at" the listener very fast and then are gone!

Why is listening often neglected and/or poorly taught?

I see three main reasons:

First, until a few years ago, it was not broadly accepted that listening comprehension should be taught explicitly at all. It was argued that students will pick up listening comprehension along the way simply by hearing the teacher. This is what I cynically call the "osmosis" approach.

Second of all, traditional second-language materials in listening courses are often not suitable for training students to listen to spoken English in the real world. Much of the material is written language recorded in carefully enunciated "teacherese," and the content is often inappropriate, boring, irrelevant or downright patronizing.

The third reason for neglecting listening comprehension is that the average classroom teacher does not feel confident about how to teach listening. Traditionally, teachers have not taught students how to listen, but simply provided exposure to listening. This is the central issue I will be addressing in this paper.

Disturbing Reality 2: Listening is a passive activity, in which the listener's task is to absorb exactly what is being said and meant.

Attainable Dream 2: Teachers recognize that listening is an active process, and that good listening is a matter of interpreting.

Traditionally, listening has been viewed as a passive and not *active* process. The listener passively attends to what is being said so as to comprehend exactly what has been said. This view of the listening process has negatively influenced what has been done until now under the heading of "teaching listening."

In reality, the competent listener is anything but passive: S/he is actively processing and interpreting, and not merely functioning as a sponge, "mopping up" the text. As Brown and Richards point out, listening is a *process of interpreting*; it is a creative process and not merely one of decoding. This requires modifying our notion of *correctness* about listening. Competent listening does not mean "getting things 100 percent right," rather it means interpreting what has been said, accepting that even native speakers misinterpret and, most important, that nothing terrible results. Changing our attitude should drastically affect the tasks we give our students, and the way in which we test listening comprehension.

All of these aspects have informed and directed my thinking about how to teach listening, resulting in what I have called a "strategy-based" approach.

Disturbing Reality 3: Some teachers assume that we listen "bottom-up" — segment by segment.

Attainable Dream 3: We commit ourselves to training our students to approach listening "top-down" — from the whole to individual parts.

Bottom-up listening is described by Anderson and Lynch as being similar to the linear way a tape-recorder records speech. They call it, "listener as tape recorder." Nunan puts it another way: with bottom-up processing, we "segment the stream of speech into its constituent sounds, link these together to form words, chain the words together to form clauses and sentences, and so on."

Approaching listening predominantly from the bottom-up is inefficient, and is not the way we approach a listening task in our native tongue. We do not want our students to use the "listener as tape recorder" approach, but rather the "listener as active hypothesis builder" — a top-down approach.

A top-down approach goes from whole to part. The listeners link what they hear to any prior knowledge they have, and on this basis, make hypotheses, predictions and inferences. Rumelhart calls this "expectative-driven processing." Activating prior knowledge is an essential component of good top-down listening. We store knowledge in schemata, and as we listen, we activate these schemata. For example, hearing the word HAILSTORM calls up everything we have in our minds about hailstorms — that is, our

"hailstorm schema." The moment this happens, we develop some expectations as to what we will and will not hear. This makes it possible to predict what will come next, form a hypothesis as to the meaning of the whole passage, and make inferences about what is not explicitly stated. Top-down processing presupposes that listening is an interpretive process.

Disturbing Reality 4: The role of the listening teacher is simply to provide comprehensible input.

Attainable Dream 4: Teachers see their role as being far more significant than merely providing comprehensible input.

Stephen Krashen has made an important contribution to our understanding of second language acquisition through his Monitor Model that evolved over the course of a decade. However, I believe that he also did our profession a disservice by arguing that the role of the teacher is merely to provide comprehensible input — that is, to provide material at a comprehensible level that the students can then "acquire." Our role, however, is a much more active one than that. Applying the recent research on learning strategies to the teaching of listening, I would argue that the teacher is much more than a provider of comprehensible input; s/he is a strategy trainer — a person who helps foreign language learners use strategies from the first language, teaches them to use additional strategies, and ultimately trains them how to listen.

Disturbing Reality 5: It does not really matter what we have our students listen to, or what we have them do with what they have heard.

Attainable Dream 5: Teachers take meticulous care in selecting listening passages and listening tasks.

To argue that it doesn't matter what our students listen to is, in fact, taking the line of least resistance. It is usually an excuse for not planning, and not thinking about the whole issue of teaching listening. Great care and thought must be given to what we have our students listen to, and why, particularly in a foreign language setting. Students' needs must be determined and their listening ability diagnosed so that the material will be of maximal value to them.

Choice of materials. The materials must be carefully selected for level, appropriateness and relevance. Motivation is seriously hindered if the material is inappropriate, either too childish or too difficult! I would recommend Krashen's I + 1 formula: setting the sights just one notch higher than the students' comfort level, so they are positively challenged, but not turned off.

onto tape. Too often, for reasons of convenience, teachers will take a piece of written prose, such as a Time Magazine essay, and record it for a listening lesson. All we are doing is reinforcing the false notion that there is no difference between written and spoken English. Students have to become aware of the "fast-speech" rules of English and learn to handle them. They have to cope, for example, with the distortion of word and syllable boundaries, which can otherwise make processing difficult.

Choice of tasks. It is equally incorrect to believe that it doesn't matter what task we give our students, having them *make do* with what they have heard:

* The tasks must be simple to administer, so that a lot of time is not wasted.
* The tasks should be varied to keep interest high.
* Care must also be taken not to overload the students' memories with memorization tasks that are not realistic even for native speakers. If students are going to be asked to listen for details, then they should be permitted to take notes.
* Students should know why they are listening to something before they begin listening. Even in our first language, we rarely listen "cold turkey" without knowing what we are listening for. Why should we do this to people in their second language?
* Students should be required to *do* something connected with what they have listened to, for example, filling out a chart. This approximates our responses in real life. May I recommend Penny Ur's 1984 book, *Teaching Listening Comprehension*, which is full of excellent ideas on listening tasks.

Teachers must be aware of the fact that if they use audio recordings and not video, the listener's task becomes much more difficult. This is because they are deprived of all the visual signals.

Disturbing Reality 6: Current ESL/EFL listening comprehension materials imply that we listen to everything in the same manner.

Attainable Dream 6: Teachers and material designers recognize that we listen to different things in different ways.

Listening Comprehension courses frequently overlook the fact that we should not be listening to everything in the same way. This monolithic approach to listening often results in virtually no significant variety in tasks, regardless of what is being listened to or why. We might find, for example, a short lecture as one passage in a course, and a conversation between two students in a cafeteria as another, with the types of questions and tasks *identical*. This, surely, is wrong, and will lead to bad listening habits!

It has long been recognized that we need to read different things in different ways, but only recently has it been argued that we must *listen to different things in different ways*.

There are, I would like to suggest, at least eight major types of listening that need to be considered when planning a listening course.

1) listening while participating in a conversation (e.g. arguing a point in a discussion)
2) listening for academic purposes, plus note-taking (e.g. lectures)
3) listening for one crucial detail (e.g. flight arrival time when calling an airline)
4) listening for all the details (e.g. following directions, instructions)
5) listening for relaxation and pleasure (e.g. movies)
6) listening for the gist of something (e.g. unplanned radio or television listening)
7) listening for mood and atmosphere (e.g. deciding what is going on between speakers)
8) listening on the telephone to different types of conversations — a particularly threatening kind of listening because of the absence of visual and many audible paralinguistic signals.

Disturbing Reality 7: Teaching listening comprehension simply entails playing passages that have been read onto tape and following this with a series of questions.

Attainable Dream 7: Teachers adopt a strategy-based approach and train students how to listen.

Testing vs. teaching. Some teachers still believe that they are teaching listening satisfactorily if they play listening material to the students and then ask a number of comprehension questions. While this is, undoubtedly, better than the "osmosis" approach that does nothing, this is not TEACHING listening — it is TESTING.

The goal of teaching listening. Gillian Brown, my mentor and guru in the field of listening, defines the goal of teaching listening as being "to listen like a native speaker." This involves two major components, both of which are covered in my strategy-based approach: First, to develop strategies *to recognize and use the signals that are provided in spoken English*: linguistic signals, such as recognizing a few lexical items which will enable the listener to work out what the topic is; paralinguistic signals that provide clues to such things as interpersonal relations; and extralinguistic clues such as background noise or visuals that provide clues as to the setting.

The second component of a good listening course is *training students how to use these signals to predict, guess and infer*. Students need to be trained to link these signals to their world knowledge, and then assist them in forming a hypothesis as to the whole meaning.

All of these are STRATEGIES, many of which we use quite unconsciously in our first language listening. One of our tasks is to bring to a conscious level what the students in fact already do, and then get them to apply these strategies in the second language. In addition, we should train them in the use of additional strategies that will help them even more.

I believe that the foundation of all second-language pedagogy is to train our students

how to do something. Our role is to show students how to tackle a listening task when not everything is comprehensible, and this requires the use of special mental processes. These mental processes are learning strategies.

Part Two
A Strategy-Based Approach to Teaching Listening Comprehension

What is a strategy-based approach?

A strategy-based approach trains students how to listen. This is done first, by making the learners aware of how the language functions — that is, by developing *metalinguistic awareness*, and second, by making them aware of the strategies that they use — developing what I call *metastrategic awareness*. The task of the teacher then becomes training learners in the use of *additional strategies that will assist them in tackling the listening task*.

Preparing for a Strategy-Based Program

First, teachers have to be prepared for this approach. They have to be convinced of its value, and feel comfortable using it, otherwise there could be serious resistance from them.

Many learners are used to a teacher-centered classroom in which the students are passive. Students have to be prepared for the *active and interactive part that they are going to be expected to now play. Without this, they will not have a sense of ownership of the approach.*

Here is an example of some of the preparation and consciousness-raising that I do to prepare students for strategy-based learning: I play a tape of eight 20- to 30-second snippets of different types of listening passages in Hebrew, and tell them to identify each piece and explain on what they based their decision. They can easily pick out, for example, a commercial, the news, a basketball commentary. I then play a difficult tape of snippets in English, and although the level is high, they do very well! They can now pick up the odd lexical item as well. This raises their consciousness and gives them confidence to try some of the strategies that I subsequently propose. They have seen the immediate pay-off!

A Suggested Outline for a Strategy-Based Course

What follows is a description of what a strategy-based listening course might contain.

In a strategy-based approach, the different units of the course should be devoted to training in the use of particular strategies. Introductory units covering various aspects of linguistic proficiency are necessary, many of which are not "strategy-based." This should include sound discrimination, recognizing and interpreting intonation, coping with "fast-speech," using discourse markers, and so on.

The Table of Contents of such a course subsequently includes such units as:

* Strategies to Determine Setting
* Strategies to Determine Interpersonal Relations
* Strategies to Determine Mood
* Strategies to Determine Topic
* Strategies to Determine the Essence of the Meaning of an Utterance
* Strategies to Predict, Guess and Infer

After suitable strategy training, the listening course should provide practice units in real, unguided listening where the focus is on overall comprehension.

A Suggested Model for the Individual Units in a Strategy-Based Listening Course

What I am proposing, then, is a model in which a different strategy or set of strategies is dealt with in each unit.

Before beginning, it is necessary to determine the listening needs of the students, their proficiency level, and their learning styles and preferred strategies (Reid, 1987).

Each unit should include some form of the following:

* *Pre-listening activities.* These activate the students' existing schema-knowledge of a topic.
* *Focusing the listening.* Making students aware, in advance, of what they are going to be listening to, and what they should be listening for.
* *Awareness and consciousness-raising.* This involves making students aware of the signals and strategies that will help them understand what something means.
* *Training activities.* These training activities must be specifically designed to give students practice in using the different strategies they have been taught. This is the essence of the strategy-based approach, and is the antithesis of the "test-retest" approach to listening.
* *Practice with real data.* There must be a lot of exposure to real listening. It is at this stage that the students will actually be applying the different strategies that they have learned in the training activities, with all supports and "crutches" removed.
* *Doing something with what has been heard.* This should take the form of some writing or speaking task, thereby replicating what we often do in real life.
* *Judging the strategy use.* Teachers should work with students and help them to judge their use of these strategies. This is another means of consciousness-raising.

Strategies to Determine Setting, Interpersonal Relations, Mood and Topic

The listening teacher must train and encourage students not to give up, even when much of what they are hearing seems incomprehensible to them. The strategies being taught do not necessarily ensure complete understanding of what is being listened to. However, being able to determine the setting, interpersonal relations, mood and topic of a listening conversation is between a man in surgical green with a stethoscope and a worried looking couple, narrows down the possibilities of exactly what is being said. Linking this to their general knowledge, the learners are then urged to predict and to make as intelligent a guess as possible as to the overall meaning. This is a classic example of getting students to transfer the strategies they use in their first language.

Students need to listen for recognizable lexical items (and/or proper names) that will help them identify what is being talked about. If, for example, they recognize just the two words 'Sarajevo' and 'bombing,' they will be able to make a first hypothesis as to the topic. If they subsequently recognize just one more expression, say, 'injured children,' much more immediately becomes clear. The hypothesis can be modified.

Another strategy is to listen for cognate words like 'inflation,' 'catastrophe,' or 'idiot' that have been Hebraized.

How do you train students to use this very valuable strategy? I have found that students benefit from what I call "guessing games:" I give students a couple of words, and then ask them to guess what the passage is going to be about. I ask them what they know about the topic, and what they think they're going to hear.

Another technique that I have used in my ESL classes has been to teach students two or three lexical items central to the topic if they really cannot get the gist of a passage at all.

Strategies to Predict, Guess and Infer

Predicting, guessing and inferring are extremely important strategies when listening. Many learners lack the confidence in their second language to make educated guesses and therefore try to listen word-by-word. First and foremost, the atmosphere must be created in which students feel comfortable guessing, knowing that they will not be ridiculed if they are wrong. It is then necessary to teach students strategies how best to predict and guess. This is done by building on the strategies already discussed, as well as working on specific strategies for predicting, guessing and inferring.

Even at a relatively low level of proficiency, games can be played in which students hear half an utterance and are asked to complete it. For example: "My sister did very well on her report card, but I..." or, "A player is lying near the goal post. I see a doctor running to..."

At a more advanced level, students can be given activities, such as the following. They hear:

Man: "The darn cat's been locked out again."

Woman: "I did it last night."

Question: What do you think will be said or will happen next?

The *competent* listener knows what the possibilities are. Notice that this example requires that we make an inference, and not merely a guess.

Training students to predict and guess feeds directly into the strategy of *hypothe*