Introducing Listening Strategies into the E.F.L. Classroom: Selecting relevant materials

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Abstract: The main focus of this paper will be to look at the sometimes forgotten skill of listening and how it relates to second language learning in more detail. This paper intends to do this by firstly briefly discussing what is known about the processes of listening. Secondly, by drawing on selected English listening courses at a major University in Japan look at other factors, which may affect the selection of activities in establishing and implementing a dedicated step-by-step collaborative listening course for E.F.L. learners. Finally, results of a recent student survey relating to student’s interest and classroom practices in this topic will also be displayed and discussed.

Keywords: collaborative learning, bottom-up/top-down listening processes, schemata, authentic listening materials

Introduction

In the past, students who undertook the study of a second language tended to center their energies on being able to translate written texts, rather than focus on oral communication. Based mainly on the Grammar-Translation method, the prevailing thought at the time was, that if you understood the grammar of the target language, then the rest would naturally follow. Other skills such as speaking and listening sometimes tended to be neglected or regarded by some people as “secondary skills – means to other ends, rather than ends in themselves” (Nunan, 1997:1).

However, since the 1960’s, there has been a renewed interest in the role that oral communication plays in the field of second language learning. In particular, the sometimes forgotten, but important part that listening plays in second language learning and acquisition. As Rost (1994) explains, listening is “vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin. Listening is thus fundamental to speaking” (Cited in Nunan, 1997:1).

Listening Processes

Underwood (1989:1) defines listening simply as the “activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear”. While it seems that this would be a relatively straightforward task for a native speaker, anyone who has attempted the study of a second language can readily appreciate how difficult at times this can actually be. Like most areas in this field, no one is quite sure how “listening works or how people learn to listen and understand” (Underwood, 1989:1). This point is further expanded by Seo (2002:57), who claims, “Listening is, after all, a covert activity, and the processes involved in listening have not yet been the subject of intensive or extensive research”. 
However despite this, it is generally accepted that there are two major processes at work when we listen. These are:

- The processes of perception involved in which the brain makes upon receiving an acoustic signal through the ear and then decoding it into language sounds.
- The processes at work, which makes the aural input meaningful to the listener.

Within these processes lie a number of sub-conscious “sub-processes” that the listener engages in. These include such things as being able to:

- Realize the relevant context of the message
- Recall relevant schemata or background information to help interpret the message (Van Duzer, 1997)
- Recognize and match key words “to the semantic structure of the text” (Peterson, 2001:90)
- Decide what information is to be transferred between short-term and long-term memory
- Assign meaning
- Predict possible outcomes of the intended message (Peterson, 2001; Van Duzer, 1997)

It must be noted that the above list is in no way exhaustive and that these do not necessary follow in any particular order. However, how these processes and “sub-processes” work and what happens when we listen is of growing interest to a number of researchers. Research once based mostly on how native speakers listen is now beginning to focus on how second language learners hear. In addition, how people perceive listening has also changed over the years. Previously thought of as a “passive skill”, it is now seen very much according to researchers such as Richards (1983) and Rubin (1995), as being an “active process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues” (Van Duzer, 1997:2).

In addition to the processes and sub-processes already discussed, at the same time we listen, two major cognitive processes are also occurring. These are referred to as bottom-up processing and top-down processing.

The first of these, bottom-up processing, is explained by Nunan (1997:1), as the “process of decoding the sounds that one hears in a linear fashion, from the smallest meaningful units (phonemes) to complete texts”. In other words, the brain acts as a sort of a “tape-recorder”, in which data entering the brain is transformed into sounds, linking into words, constituents, clauses and grammatical relationships, eventually ending up as meaning for the listener (Anderson & Lynch, 1989, cited in Nunan, 1997).

On the other hand, top-down processing, works from the other end. The premise being that the listener re-constructs meaning using the incoming sounds as clues. To do this the listener relies on his or hers prior schemata or background knowledge to anticipate the meaning of what the speaker may say. For example, a person may say:

“It is cold here. Please...”
In this phrase, we are not sure of the ending, but through *top-down processing*, we can probably deduce it might be to do such an action as “close the door/window, or turn on the heater” because the proceeding sentence provided us with the information that “it was cold” and the request “please” was also stated. This combined with our prior knowledge of what to do when it is cold, can help us to anticipate meaning.

Researchers tend to agree that when we listen, both *bottom-up processing* and *top-down processing* compliment each other. As Peterson (2001:89) explains, “In proficient listeners, top-down and bottom-up processes interact, so that lack of information at one level can be compensated for by checking against information at the other level”. Van Duzer (1997:3) also warns that “learners need to be aware that both of these processes affect their listening comprehension, and they need to be given opportunities to practice employing each of them”.

**Other Factors Affecting the Selection of Listening Activities**

As already discussed, there are a number of processes and sub-processes taking part when we listen. For a native speaker, these are skills that occur simultaneously and sub-consciously. However, for a second language learner, there will be times when these processes will break down. When this occurs, as Peterson (2001:90) explains, the listener “becomes aware of the need for repair and seeks an appropriate strategy for comprehension”. As a result, listening then becomes a conscious effort on the part of the listener.

Therefore it is important for teachers to take care when selecting strategies and listening activities for their classes. Van Duzer (1997) drawing on a number of researchers including Brod (1996), Brown (1994), Dunkel (1991), Mendelsohn (1994), Morley (1991), Peterson (1991), Richards (1983) and Rost (1991), has come up with a summary of points that teachers may need to consider. Some of these are listed below.

**Listening tasks should be relevant**
If the students are listening to something they can relate to and possibly help them in their daily life, this will help keep their motivation high. If the text is not of a particular interest, there will be a tendency for the students to shut off.

**Materials should be authentic**
The tasks should be kept as “natural” as possible by including such things as pauses, rephrasing and various accents. As Van Duzer (1997:3) further explains, the “level of difficulty can be controlled by the selection of task”. In other words, texts should not be “modified” or slowed down. By keeping listening tasks authentic, will not only help learners keep abreast of current language trends, such as “slang” words, sayings and idioms, but will also aid in building up confidence by allowing language to be experienced in a more practical way. Field (2002:244) concurs suggesting that authentic materials should be introduced as early as possible as recordings of “spontaneous speech expose learners to the rhythms of natural everyday English in a way scripted materials cannot, however, good the actors”.

**Should incorporate both bottom-up and top-down processing**
As already discussed, these processes play a major role in the cognitive ability of the listener. By designing activities which encourage the students to think more about the meaning and breakdown of the text, will help them later on to become better proficient listeners.

**The development of different listening strategies should be encouraged**

There are a number of supplementary materials that teachers can employ to provide authentic listening opportunities. By using a variety of approaches and different resources in the lesson, such as DVD’s or visual bytes available from the Internet, could in turn help the teacher in the setting of pre-listening tasks or non-verbal cues through the lesson. This point is further expanded by Rates (2010:35), who states that the use of video in a listening classroom is a great tool, adding the caveat that teachers should try to employ visuals that “spark classroom creativity and inspire students’ imagination”, by presenting situations that “contain meaningful context relating to the lives of students”.

**Activities should teach not test**

Probably the most important point in this summary, students and a lot of the times teachers, tend to relate a listening task as a challenge to test or prove existing knowledge. Efforts should be made to design lessons to promote and encourage learning rather than just reinforcing knowledge already gained. This could be done through such activities as listening games, role-playing real-life situations or some of the other strategies discussed previously, rather than just employing simple true and false or multiple choice answers.

**Cultural concerns should be taken into consideration**

In addition to the above factors, the writers also believe that cultural considerations need to be taken into account. Based on our own individual experiences of teaching in the U.S., Australia and in Japan, it is safe to say that there is certainly a huge difference on what goes on in each classroom. On the whole, Japanese students tend to be shier and are well accustomed to being tested a lot. Students in the U.S. and Australia generally tend to be the opposite. Of course exceptions exist, however, it is worth noting that what listening strategy that might work in one classroom environment, may not necessarily work in the other. If teachers introduce new information too quickly without taking into account the students’ cultural background experience, negative effects may result in the learning process (Ellis, 1995).

**Into Practice**

So far, this paper has presented some of the theoretical aspects outlining the processes and sub-processes that are occurring during a listening task. Based on this knowledge, the authors at their respective Japanese universities have tried to introduce the students to think more critically and globally about current issues and new technologies, by exposing them to authentic sound and visual bytes readily available from the Internet. To achieve this, the authors have moved slightly away from a typical 3 step listening lesson, which usually involves a pre-listening activity, the listening task itself and a post-listening activity. Instead, the authors have opted to expand the activity to involve and engage the students more thoroughly in the activity through discussion and collaborative group work.
TABLE 1. Classroom Flow

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Homework</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pre-Viewing</td>
<td>Watch the video at home and complete the pre-viewing questions before class</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- In collaborative groups, students discuss the previewing questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Extensive Listening</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Students are given a worksheet with questions relating to the video</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Video is played 5 times. After each time played, students discuss their answers in their groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Strategic Listening Activity</td>
<td>Review week 1 and watch the video at home for the Strategic Listening Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students are given a transcript of the video containing a number of blanks</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Video is played 3 times, transcripts are collected</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-Viewing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students are again placed in groups and work together on a series of activities relating to the theme of the unit</td>
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**Classroom Flow**

The materials presented in this paper were taught to 1st year Engineering University students in Japan. The class meets once a week for 90 minutes over 15 weeks. There are about 35 students in each class. One theme or unit is covered every two weeks (Table 1). As a result each course consist of 6 units and a mid-term and final course assessment. Students are assessed mainly on their preparation, discussion and participation in their collaborative groups. For each unit one video relating to the theme is selected. Themes vary but as earlier mentioned in this paper, they should be relevant and more importantly, strive to be of somewhat interest to the students. The unit covered in this paper is “Aviation”.

**Pre-viewing Exercises – Week 1**

In the first week of the unit, a 3-minute video is posted up on the student’s university web-site for students to view before class. If the students do not have a web site, there are a number of free sites such as “Engrade” or “Moodle” that can accommodate this. The videos themselves are taken from free to air public, mainly news and documentary sites, readily accessible in Japan. It should be said that all attempts are made to ensure there are no breaches of copyright. Article 35(1) of the Japanese Copyright Act allows for educational institutions to reproduce a work already made public, as long as it is for non-profit and for educational purposes, and that “such reproduction does not unreasonably prejudice the interests of the copyright owner in
the light of the nature and the purpose of the work as well as the number of copies and the form of reproduction” (CRIC, 2012). All videos are edited to around 3 minutes in length in an attempt to comply with current Japanese copyright laws.

The students are encouraged to watch the video as many times as possible before coming to class. In addition to this, a set of questions and exercises relating to the unit but not directly to the video are also set for homework. The purpose of these two activities is to help provide the students with the relevant schema and hopefully interest, before class. In class, before the video is played, students are put into groups of four people to discuss the answers that were set for homework. Completion of these tasks before class will help ensure a flowing and informative activity. The idea behind this activity is to give the students a sense of involvement and hopefully help motivate them for the up and coming listening task.

**Extensive Listening Task**

The students are given a worksheet with a set of questions that this time, relate directly to the video. The students still remain in their groups. The video is played 5 times with a pause each time for members in the group to discuss possible answers. There are a number of reasons for this approach. First, as previously discussed, tasks should attempt to teach not test. Second, students tend to feel more confident when they are supporting each other. Also it is not always clear what other skills are coming into play. For example, individual students may give a wrong answer if they make a mistake with their reading comprehension (Field, 2002). For this task, scores are awarded to students not only on the quality of their answers, but on how well they participated in their groups.

**Strategic Listening Task – Week 2**

In week 2 of this unit, the class starts with a cloze exercise. The students are given a transcript of the video with 15 missing words in blanks. The students are not given the list of words and must deduce the words from what they hear. This is done individually and the video played 3 times. It is thought that by this stage, students have had enough time to become fully acquainted with the video. In addition, for this task, the visual is switched off, leaving only the audio. Field (2002:244) refers to this as a “strategic” listening task where “non native listeners recognise only part of what they hear and have to make guesses which link these fragmented pieces of text”. The cloze papers are then collected and graded allowing for spelling mistakes, as it is not a writing test.

**Post-viewing Exercises**

Finally, in week 2 of the unit we again engage the students in groups, to a series of post-viewing exercises. These tasks are related to the theme of the unit, which include a number of word meaning associations. As Field (2:245) states, it “remains worthwhile” in post-listening activities to “pick out any functional language and draw learners’ attention to it”. In addition, the students are set a series of discussion questions based on the recently covered theme. Finally, the groups are encouraged to self evaluate themselves on such things on how much they understood and how well they participated in the group activity. This follows along the lines of Van Duzer (1997:4) who believes that post-viewing activities should help the listener to “evaluate success in carrying out the task and to integrate listening with the other language skills.”
Student Feedback

To gauge student interest and attitude in this topic and to help with the selection of potential units of work and topic themes, a survey was administered at the end of the 15-week block. The survey was in both English and Japanese, so the students could clearly understand the items being addressed. A five point Likert scale was used to gather data. The survey consisted of 15 questions and was preceded with 4 open-ended questions and was administered during the middle of class, in order for the students not to feel rushed at the end. All in all, 35 participants were surveyed.

Survey Results

Of interest was the number of students who used English outside of the classroom (Figure 1.). In particular was the students desire to learn English in order to participate on social media sites such as “facebook” or “twitter” with people from other countries. 43 percent of the respondents indicated that online social activities have given them a practical reason for wanting to improve their English communication skills. This is especially interesting given the fact that 91 percent of the respondents have never visited an English speaking country (Figure 2.).

Figure 1. Use of English Outside of Class
Figure 2. Have visited an English speaking country

![Pie chart showing percentages of different visit durations to English-speaking countries.]

Figure 3. Q1. How many times did you play the video before class?

![Pie chart showing percentages of different video play times.]

TABLE 2. Survey Percentage Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Viewing Exercises</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>UD</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. The pre-viewing exercises were too difficult to do for homework</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The vocabulary was useful in helping to understand the video</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussing the Answers</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. I like discussing the answers in groups</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. There should be no discussion, the teacher should tell the answers only</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. In our groups, it is easier to understand the answers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Listening Exercises
7. The questions relating to the video are too difficult 3 6 0 68 23
8. The teacher should play the video more 0 3 3 77 17

**Post-Viewing Exercises**

9. The Cloze Exercises were too difficult 3 8 77 9 3
10. It is difficult to study for the Cloze exercises 3 11 48 29 9
11. The Post-Viewing articles were interesting 3 9 56 20 12

**General Comments**

12. Each unit was a challenge for me 0 6 77 14 3
13. I learnt more about the topic after each unit 0 6 55 33 6
14. I like watching authentic videos made for native English speakers 3 6 34 40 17
15. I believe my listening skills have improved 0 0 6 80 14

A detailed summary of the rest of the survey results, are provided in Table 2 above. It ranges from “strongly disagree” to “undecided” to “strongly agree”. Results showed that for the pre-viewing exercises a majority of students were undecided on the level of difficulty, with a majority of students (40%) playing the video more than 5 times before class (Figure 3). However the results were fairly evenly balanced on the difficulty of the vocabulary. As previously discussed, in the pre-listening activity, we have tried to move away from just teaching a set of vocabulary through the setting of homework tasks and class group discussions. The authors agree with Field (2002:243) who explains that, “in real-life, learners cannot expect unknown words to be explained in advance; instead they have to learn to cope with situations where part of what is heard is not familiar”.

It would also appear that a good number of students (37%) liked discussing the answers in their groups (questions 4-6), but there were still a few (22%) who preferred if the teacher gave the correct answer only. Again this could relate back to cultural settings. Japanese students at high school are conditioned into thinking that there is only one right answer to every question and that answer is usually spoon fed by the teacher. To question a teacher, would according to Kelly (1997:1), “demonstrate a disrespectful and audacious attitude on the student’s part.” This may explain the variance in the results.

The majority of the students also thought the questions relating to the videos were too difficult. This was to be anticipated, as this is sometimes the downside of using authentic materials. The type of listening that occurs through real-life and authentic materials can be quite different to those that are scripted and they may be a tendency for some students to panic when faced with an authentic text. However, as previously discussed, the case for introducing authentic materials is quite strong as Spelleri (2002:17) concurs, “exposure to authentic language means that prediction skills will be honed and the learners will improve their strategies for dealing with uncertainty”.

Moreover, the students seemed to be fairly undecided on the difficulty level of the cloze exercises (question 9) with the majority (38%) agreeing it was difficult to study for them. However, there were more students who found the other post-viewing activities more interesting than those who did not. We believe that perhaps by the
time that they got to the post-viewing exercises after 2 weeks more students were used to the topic and had more knowledge to discuss about it.

Finally, we were happy to note that the majority of the students enjoyed watching the videos with most of them agreeing (94%) that their English skills had improved. The only surprise was that perhaps the use of the word “challenge” in the survey was misunderstood, as the Japanese tend to use this word for “fight” and maybe the reason for the high number of undecided responses (77%). Post interviews with students tended not to match this result.

Conclusion

So far in this paper, the authors have tried to present a brief summary of what is known about the processes of listening. While in the past, listening may have been perhaps neglected as an important skill in the study of second language learning and acquisition, it would appear to these two writers, that the trend now appears to be the opposite. Like most areas in the field of second language learning and acquisition, no one is 100% sure how listening works. However recent research does tend to suggest that listening entails a combination of processes as well as “sub-processes”, which all work in tandem without seeming to follow any particular order. What is important to us as second language teachers is to understand how these processes work, and what to do when they break down. The survey analysis of the example of the listening strategy shown in this paper demonstrates that this is an ongoing process requiring further research and discussion. By having a better understanding of these processes and other factors discussed in this paper relating to the selection of listening activities, we believe, can help in enabling us as educators to plan and formulate more effective listening strategies.

References


