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Listening Tasks and Language Acquisition

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Introduction: Principles of language acquisition and decisions in teaching

As communicative language teaching continues to evolve, teachers are becoming increasingly aware of the important role of listening in language acquisition. In communicative English classes students are surrounded by the spoken language – from the teacher, from their peers, and from audio and video media. Although students are expected to understand and respond to this language in some fashion, they are often given only vague guidance about how to listen and how to learn from listening. Some method of structuring learners' expectations for how to listen is needed in order to maximize these learning opportunities.

Although it is not always apparent, our key decisions about teaching are grounded in our theory of language acquisition. What we decide to do in the classroom is influenced by our beliefs about the nature of second language acquisition (SLA), our theories about feedback, our views of teacher and student roles, and so on. Whatever theory we subscribe to, it entails assumptions about (1) the psychological nature of the acquisition process, (2) the relative position of the role and importance of input and interaction, and (3) a view concerning the learners' own capacity to influence their own success in acquisition of the language. When translated into concrete decisions about classroom instruction, these principles clearly affect our selection of input that learners see and hear, our choice of the types of activities we ask learners to engage in, and the kind of feedback we feel we should give to our students.

The aim of this short paper is to articulate some principles of language development that directly influence our decisions about teaching listening. In particular, how we select input, how we construct activities and tasks, and how we “empower” students to become better learners. The paper will outline four basic principles derived from current SLA theories, focusing on the notion of a “task” as central to the teaching of listening. The paper concludes by demonstrating the types of tasks that can be used in both classroom and self-access settings.

Principle 1: Choose input to increase learners' motivation

The most optimistic view of second language learning is that any learner with persistent motivation, adequate access to the L2 environment, and enough time can acquire a second language to a near-native level. Whether or not this is true in its strongest

form, we do know that motivation is the primary trigger of language acquisition, leading the learner to seek opportunities for learning (i.e. input, output and feedback opportunities) and make a commitment to overcome obstacles and sustain progress.

The initial research paradigm was that learners bring a fixed level of motivation to their learning situations, based on their intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for wanting to learn the new language. However, the research paradigm has been extended to include the ways learners' motivations become clarified and change over time in response to experiences they have (Crookes and Schmidt, 1991). We now understand how successful experiences with understanding and using the target language and supportive encounters with speakers of the target language can shift or amplify motivation, while continual misunderstandings and unsupportive interactions tend to erode motivation (Aniero, 1990; Dornyei, 2001).

In terms of selecting input (e.g., listening, reading, or multimedia) for language teaching, the research on motivation supports a position that most experienced teachers have adopted for years. That is, our first priority in planning individual lessons and entire courses is to ensure successful learning experiences that will encourage *wanting to learn* the language. Therefore, it is important that the teacher select what Beebe (1985) termed “the right stuff”—the kinds of input that will engage learners, arouse their curiosity, and make them want to remember what they are learning.

After choices about topics and types of input, two additional factors are part of the input selection process. The first factor is editing or cuing the listening extract itself. While there is a wealth of L2 listening material available from media and Internet sources, particularly for learners of English, hardly any of it can be used “as is,” in an unedited, or unprepared form. The teacher needs to decide which parts of the input are most

worthy of focusing upon. Part of the guidance for this decision is simply length. Generally, learners at any level need to have much of input “chunked” into shorter segments of 30 to 90 seconds, followed by a means of reviewing and consolidating the content. Due to the constraints of short-term memory, a learner may not receive much benefit from continued listening without *intervening tasks* to help with memory consolidation (Brown and Hulme, 1992).

The second factor is pre-listening preparation. To maximize learning, it is vital that the teacher create “pre-listening” tasks that activate the learners' knowledge and interest. Any techniques that help engage learners in wanting to listen actively are likely to promote better learning. Pre-listening surveys, pair questionnaires, or prediction activities using key vocabulary from the extract are often helpful.

Principle 2: Design clear tasks that focus on meaning

The notion of task is central to learning in all fields. Definitions of a task in language education differ, but there seems to be a convergence on three factors. First is that a task is a fundamental “learning structure,” designed for the purposes of increasing learning (Skehan and Foster, 1997). Second, a task involves distinct input (oral and/or visual), a clear set of procedures, and a tangible outcome (Candlin and Koebke, 1999). Third, a task can be monitored and evaluated by the teacher, who can provide some form of feedback and evaluation on performance.

Listening tasks can be one-way or two-way. In a one-way task all input comes from an outside source (like a videotape) to the learner, and the learner is responsible for doing something with the input (such as writing down key words and formulating

main ideas). In a two-way task, some input comes from outside, usually from a partner, and the learner has to process that information, then produce some kind of comprehensible output to a partner to complete a collaborative task. Both kinds of tasks are useful in communicatively oriented classrooms because they focus on interactive speaking and listening.

For planning purposes, listening tasks can be divided into “pre-listening,” “while-listening,” and “post-listening” phases:

● Pre-listening

Effective listening tasks often involve an explicit “pre-listening” step, some activity that the learner does prior to listening to the main input in order to increase readiness. This step is designed to activate what the learner already knows, provide an “advance organizer” to help the learner predict ideas and “pre-structure” information (Joyce et al., 1992). The pre-listening step may include explicit pre-teaching of vocabulary, grammatical or rhetorical structures, specific pronunciations of phrases, or ideas to be contained in the upcoming input.

● While-listening

When the learner actually begins listening to the input, there needs to be some expectation for concrete action. “While-listening” tasks can include guided note taking, completion of a picture or schematic diagram or table, composing questions—any tangible activity that the learner does while listening to demonstrate ongoing monitoring of meaning. This stage of the listening task is usually the most problematic for the teacher to prepare because it involves designing a task that involves only minimal reading or writing.

● Post-listening

The “post-listening” stage of listening occurs in the few minutes following the actual attending to the text. This is probably the most important part of listening instruction because it allows the learner to build mental representations and develop short-term L2 memory, and increase motivation for listening a second time. Post-listening tasks can involve additional reading, writing, speaking, and interaction, and may include comparing notes, negotiating a summary with a partner, and formulating responses, or questions about what was just heard.

The entire cycle of a tasks involving pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening may require 15 minutes for each short extract that the learners hear. It is important that the cycle can be repeated to allow for a second and third listening. This repetition of while-listening and post-listening tasks, with some variation, gives learners time to try out new strategies for understanding.

Principle 3: Encourage the use of active listening strategies

Introspection research with L2 listeners as well as longitudinal studies of language learners have revealed a profile of styles that successful or “skilled” listeners versus unsuccessful or “unskilled” listeners tend to adopt (Vandergrift, 1999; Bremer et al., 1996). “Skilled” listeners in this discussion are not defined in terms of proficiency, but in terms of perspective, that is, how they approach a listening task. According to Vandergrift (1999), skilled listeners tend to: (1) orient early in the experience and formulate the “big picture” of what the speakers are trying to do, (2) interact more with “text” and their “world knowledge,” (3) be willing to make hypotheses about unknown meanings

(i.e., elaborate). By contrast, unskilled listeners tend to: (1) wait until late in the experience to orient and often miss the “big picture” of what is going on, (2) concentrate too much on “text” and are easily thrown off by unknown information or, conversely, tend to rely too much on their own “world knowledge,” and (3) not be willing to make hypotheses about unknown meanings.

A way of summarizing this difference is characterizing the “successful” listener as someone who adopts active listening strategies. An active listening strategy is an attempt to gain some control over the listening process. Vandergrift (1999) and Rost (2002) have outlined the basic constructive strategies that successful L2 listeners tend to adopt when they encounter some uncertainty:

- predicting – using real world expectations to generate predictions about what the speakers will say and what might happen;
- guessing – making inferences about what the speakers might have said or might have meant, even when “bottom up” information about the language may be incomplete;
- selecting – focusing on key words, trying to select targeted information that is adequate to complete a given task;
- clarifying – monitoring one’s level of understanding and identifying questions that can be asked to supplement partial understanding or correct misunderstanding, and revising one’s representation of meaning;

- responding – reflecting or attempting to formulate an opinion, to interact with the speaker, to personalize the content, focus on what was understood, attempt to talk about the input or conversation in a comfortable way.

If we teach these strategies explicitly and persistently, and if we incorporate their use directly into our listening tasks, we are helping learners gain control over the listening process. When learners can consciously adjust their efforts and participation, they tend to become more comfortable and more active in a listener role.

Principle 4: Build steps into activities that enhance language awareness

One of the major obstacles in listening instruction is that learners become habituated to ignoring numerous features of the target language input and begin to “fossilize” in their listening ability. Because of capacity limitations, the learner attends to the most recognizable aspects of the input, while other parts of the input remain a blur. Therefore, one goal of listening instruction is to help learners “notice” more of the input and utilize more information from the input as they construct meaning.

The term “noticing” in language acquisition theory refers to a conscious movement of attention toward “new” aspects of input, what Robinson (1998) calls “a momentary subjective experience” of observing something for the first time. The key to utilizing the concept of noticing in listening instruction involves both timing and context (Lightbown, 1998). In order to be effective, noticing of a new feature has to occur in real-time and in a context where the listener’s attention naturally goes toward building meaning. If language instructors can successfully incorporate explicit noticing

steps into tasks, learners can then accelerate their learning and make breakthroughs in listening ability.

Long (1998) has outlined a progression of ways that teachers can assist learners to become more aware of specific language features in listening activities. The first (“least obtrusive”) way is to design the input with a “flood” of target features (a grammatical example would be many instances of the passive voice; a pragmatic example would be instances of a particular formula for refusing an invitation). The second way, utilized in the “processing instruction” approach of Van Patten (1996), is to design the task outcome to require noticing of the particular feature. A third way is to provide “input enhancement,” either by previewing (by way of a pre-listening task) or highlighting (by giving it greater stress) a particular feature so that it is more likely to be noticed (Sharwood-Smith, 1993). In addition to these while-listening tasks, post-listening tasks involving negotiation and reconstruction of the input (such as the dictogloss technique described by Wajnryb (1997)) can also be used.

Illustration: Incorporating principles into task design

Putting these principles into practice is not difficult if we bear in mind that our goal in instructional design is to try to address each principle in at least a limited way with each listening task. There is no ideal formula: the actual tasks we design will be influenced by the input we are using, the time frame for the lesson, and the interests and abilities of the students. The listening task sequence demonstrated here, based on a unit in Rost and Fuchs (2002), is outlined as a series of possible steps from a “lesson menu.” In most classes, a teacher would utilize only one step for each “menu”—pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening.

Input: a short, composed text about a sports figure, Lance Armstrong, intended for an intermediate level class

In the spotlight on this TV minute is Lance Armstrong, “the Golden Boy of Cycling.”

Lance Armstrong was born on September 18, 1971 in a small Texas town. From early on, it was clear that he was a natural athlete. In 1984, at age 13, Lance won a national triathlon, excelling at running, swimming, and bicycling. By 1987, while he was still in high school, Lance had turned professional. He decided to focus exclusively on bicycling, saying, “I was born to race bikes.” Between 1988 and 1996, Armstrong won numerous international races. In January 1996 he was the top-ranked cyclist in the world. Then, during a race in October of that year, Armstrong fell off his bike in excruciating pain. They discovered that he had cancer, which had spread to his lungs and brain. Given only a 50 per cent chance of surviving, in 1997 Armstrong underwent difficult cancer treatment. Amazingly, he not only survived, he returned to competition, winning several major races in 1998. Since that time, Armstrong has gone on to win many more races, including the Tour de France in 1999, 2000, and 2001. Lance says that cancer was an unexpected gift. “I used to ride my bike to make a living. Now I just want to live so that I can ride.”

Note: This is a composed text, based on an authentic genre, and pre-recorded before class. Students would hear this only; they would not have access to the script. The entire text is about 200 words, which is about 75 seconds in length, when read at normal speed.

Pre-listening menu

1. An orientation activity, designed to enable students to activate what they already know and to predict information.

Many great athletes are known not only for their victories on the playing field but also for their personal triumphs away from their sport. World champion cyclist Lance Armstrong is one such person.

What do you know about him? Work with a partner. List what you know about him.

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Note: This activity can be accompanied with visuals to jog students' memory. It is best done collaboratively.

2. A vocabulary and grammar activity, designed to help students in advance with problematic vocabulary and structures.

Here are some expressions from the passage you will hear. Listen to the teacher say them. Are you familiar with these expressions?

- it was clear that...
- he excelled at...
- they discovered that...
- Amazingly, he...
- it was an unexpected gift
- I used to..., but now I...

Note: It is important in a pre-listening activity not to give away the meaning of the passage.

While-listening menu

3. A table completion activity, designed to be done during two or three listens.

Listen to this “TV Minute,” spotlighting Lance Armstrong, “The Golden Boy of Cycling.” Listen for dates and key events in his life. As you listen, look at the time line below. Listen for one event for each date on the time line. Write a short phrase for each event.

• ••• •• •

1971 1984 1986 1988-1996 1996 1997 1999, 2000, 2001

Note: This activity could be adjusted by providing short phrases for the students to match with the dates.

4. A note-taking activity, designed to be done during two or three listens.

Listen to this “TV Minute,” spotlighting Lance Armstrong, “The Golden Boy of Cycling.” Listen for dates and key events in his life. Take notes as you listen.

Note: Note taking is a selective listening process. When asking students to take notes, it is best to give some way of guiding the selection process.

5. A noticing activity, best done after one of the more global activities above.

Read these sentences. Some of these are in the passage. Listen again. Which of these phrases are in the passage? Check them.

- From the time he was a child, it was clear that he was a natural-born athlete.
- While he was still in high school, Lance was turning professional.
- He decided to focus primarily on bicycling.
- By January 1996 he was the top-ranked cyclist in the country.
- Armstrong had fallen off his bike in excruciating pain.
- It had been discovered that he had cancer.
- Since that time, Armstrong has been able to win many more races.
- Armstrong has said that cancer was an unnecessary gift.

Now work with a partner. Can you change these sentences to match the passage? Listen again and check.

Note: A noticing activity is most effective if it has a clear language focus. This activity focuses on verb tenses. Noticing activities can also focus on phonology, vocabulary, or pragmatics.

Post-listening menu

6. A partner activity, designed to help students articulate what they have understood.

Work with a partner. Compare your time lines.
Give extra information about each event.

Note: This kind of activity “pushes output” – it forces students to articulate their ideas in a comprehensible way.

7. A clarification activity, designed to help students use active listening strategies.

Do you have any questions about the passage? Are there any new vocabulary words? Ask your teacher now. Use these phrases:

- What does “...” mean?
- I heard a phrase that sounded like “.....” I’m not familiar with that.
- I couldn’t catch the part after “...”

Note: The purpose of the clarification step is to encourage the social strategy of asking questions. By giving models of clarification questions, the teacher can encourage specific kinds of clarification.

8. A reflection activity, designed to personalize the activity.

Listen to the passage one last time. In your own words, what is the theme of this “TV Minute”? What feeling do you get when you listen to the passage? Do you know anyone like Lance Armstrong?

Note: Giving students an explicit opportunity to “personalize” their understanding will make learning more memorable.

9. A reflection activity, designed to encourage active listening and give the students a more active role in the class.

Evaluate this passage and the tasks.

Passage:

[] [] []

not very a little very
interesting interesting interesting

How difficult was this passage and the tasks for you?

[] [] []

not so difficult a little difficult very difficult

Which task was most useful for you?

Did your partner help you understand the passage better? How?

Would you change any of the tasks? How?

Note: This kind of reflection task helps students monitor their own progress in listening, and gives them tools to adjust their own listening strategies outside of the classroom.

Summary

Teachers often use listening activities in the classroom and give students homework involving listening. Though listening practice alone is potentially very useful, many listening activities can be greatly improved through the use of task design principles. This paper outlined four basic principles. By reviewing these principles and posing questions relating to them as they design listening activities, teachers can become more effective at maximizing the value of listening for their students:

1. Input selection	Will the input increase learner's motivation? Is it interesting? Is it relevant? Is it packaged in a way that makes it accessible?
2. Task design	Does the task promote learning? Is the task worth doing? Does the task focus on meaning? Does the task have pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening phases? Are the procedures clear? Are there clear outcomes? Can the tasks be repeated?
3. Strategy use	Are the learners encouraged to use active listening strategies? Are there opportunities in the task for predicting, guessing, selecting, clarifying, monitoring, responding, interacting, reflecting?

4. Language Awareness	Does the task promote language awareness? Are there opportunities for the student to notice new vocabulary and structures?
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By using these principles in listening task design, teachers can clarify their beliefs about language acquisition and create tasks that are more suitable for their students.

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