

# ***Skills and strategies: towards a new methodology for listening***

**John Field**

*This article calls for a rethinking of the purposes of the listening lesson, and examines ways in which we can teach the skill rather than simply practise it. The approaches proposed are based on micro-listening exercises which practise individual subskills of listening. The implications of using authentic materials are then examined, and a case is made for teaching recognition of the features of spontaneous speech. Finally, a strategic view of listening is presented, and it is argued that classroom activities need to take account of the true nature of real-life L2 listening, where understanding is partial, and inferencing is crucial.*

**Introduction** In the late 1960s and early 1970s, listening comprehension lessons followed a relatively consistent format:

- pre-teaching of new vocabulary;
- extensive listening → questions about general context;
- intensive listening → detailed questions;
- examination of vocabulary and/or exponents of grammar;
- use of play and repeat/play and predict/recall words.

We pride ourselves on having advanced beyond the view that underpins this approach, which sees listening primarily as a way of reinforcing language input. But it is worthwhile asking how fundamental the changes in practice which have occurred over the past 25 years have really been.

Granted, additions and amendments have been made to the model of the late 1960s. A present-day listening lesson is likely to be very different, and to include some or all of the following stages:

- pre-listening (for context and motivation);
- extensive listening → questions to establish the situation;
- pre-set questions or pre-set task;
- extensive listening;
- review of questions or task;
- inferring new vocabulary/examination of functional language.

The changes that have taken place reflect three developments in the way listening is viewed. Firstly, there has been a shift in perspective, so that listening as a skill takes priority over details of language content.

Secondly, there has been a wish to relate the nature of listening practised in the classroom to the kind of listening that takes place in real life. This is reflected in the provision of a contextual framework, recognition of the importance of inferring the meaning of new words, the use of recordings which are authentic in origin, the inclusion of material with conversational features, and the use of simulated tasks rather than formal exercises. Thirdly, we have become aware of the importance of providing motivation and a focus for listening. The listener is encouraged to develop expectations as to what will be heard in the text, then to check them against what is actually said. By presetting questions and tasks, we ensure that learners are clear from the start about the purpose of the listening exercise, and will not have to rely heavily on memory.

There has certainly been change, but this article will argue that we have only modified the methodology of the late 1960s when perhaps we needed to rethink it. The teaching of listening has become more sensitive to learner needs, but our listening lessons remain predictable in form and content, and the presuppositions which underlie them are left unquestioned. Three issues will be explored here which give us cause to look again at current practice: how to teach listening rather than practise it, the implications of using authentic materials, and the nature of real-life second-language listening.

**Process vs.  
product**

As is often pointed out (e.g. Brown 1986: 286, Sheerin 1987: 126), the methodology profiled above provides practice in listening but fails to teach the skill. A conventional listening comprehension lesson simply adds yet another text to the learners' experience; it does little or nothing to improve the effectiveness of their listening or to address their shortcomings as listeners. Learners may have experienced difficulties at certain points of the listening text. These are attended to in terms of the language and meaning of the text, but no attention is paid to what may have gone wrong in the process of listening. Hence the likelihood that, confronted with a similar text next time, learners will use the same, unsuccessful techniques. They will not have improved as listeners.

Under the present 'comprehension' approach, success in listening is measured by correct responses to questions or tasks. Teachers focus upon the outcomes of listening, rather than upon listening itself, upon product rather than process. When a learner supplies a correct answer, there is no indication as to how that answer has been arrived at: has meaning been constructed by correctly identifying all the words in a particular piece of text, or by identifying one word and making an inspired guess?

**A diagnostic  
approach**

From a process perspective, wrong answers can be seen to be of more significance than correct ones. Instead of judging understanding by the number of learners who answer correctly, teachers need to follow up incorrect responses in order to determine where understanding broke down and to put things right. Implicit here is a view of the listening

lesson as a diagnostic activity, the function of the teacher being to identify and redress learners' weaknesses as listeners. This accords with Brown's analysis of the situation (1986: 286): 'Until we have some diagnostic procedures, the teacher can only continue to *test* comprehension, not to teach it. We need to move to a position where the teacher is able to recognize particular patterns of behaviour manifested by an unsuccessful listener and to provide exercises for the student which will promote superior patterns of behaviour . . .' Sheerin (1987: 129) reaches a similar conclusion, and has some useful practical proposals.

A diagnostic approach to listening involves revising the conventional lesson format adopted by many teachers and coursebooks. Listening lessons are often top-heavy. They begin with an extended pre-listening period in which relevant language is revised, or there is discussion about the topic of the text. This is followed by the setting of a task and by a period (often quite short) of listening. Finally, in the last minutes of the lesson, answers are checked. A revised lesson model might feature a shorter pre-listening period, of as little as five minutes, which focuses on creating motivation and establishing context. This would be followed by a lengthy listening session, with several replays for learners to re-listen and check their answers. Finally, there would be an extended post-listening session (possibly in a subsequent lesson) in which gaps in learners' listening skills could be examined and redressed through short micro-listening exercises.

**Syntactic cues** Where might we expect understanding to break down? What is likely to be the subject matter of a remedial micro-listening exercise? Most obviously, misunderstandings occur at the level of syntax, when learners overlook inflexional signals or misinterpret structures. An enormous weight of meaning, for example, is carried by a single phoneme in 'I've lived there for three years' as against 'I lived there for three years'. See Field (1983) for examples of post-listening dictation exercises which tackle problems of syntactic parsing.

**Subskills** A second, perhaps more fruitful, way of approaching listening difficulties reflects current practice in the teaching of reading. For fifteen years, it has been axiomatic that more reading does not necessarily mean better reading. An analytic approach has been adopted (Grellet 1981, Nuttall 1982) which regards efficient reading as dependent on a set of subskills, and those subskills as the basis for a developmental programme. Typically, teachers of L2 reading seek to train learners in skimming, scanning, prediction, inferring unknown words, and a number of other techniques.

It is curious that the same approach has not been applied systematically to listening, given that the subskills of listening closely parallel those of reading. Breaking listening into subskills offers two possibilities. It can support the kind of diagnostic approach already outlined, providing a checklist against which many breakdowns of understanding can be

matched: is the breakdown due, for example, to failure to identify unstressed words, to failure to select the most important points of information, or to problems caused by assimilation? Alternatively, as in the teaching of reading, it can provide material for a series of short sessions, in which subskills are practised individually as preparation for longer and more integrated listening exercises. In such a prognostic approach, the teacher sets aside five or ten minutes on a regular basis for micro-listening practice. The practice session could involve, for example, the dictation of a series of short sentences which exemplify a single type of listening difficulty. Material of this kind provides excellent end-of-lesson 'fillers'.

Here, then, is a principled way of planning a series of short listening exercises with the aim of ensuring better listening. Practice can be provided in each subskill in turn, just as it is in reading. The approach, as for reading, would be one of analysis leading to synthesis: once practised, the subskills would be combined and applied to longer listening texts. A major consideration would be appropriacy: any subskills practised, alone or in combination, should naturally be relevant to the type of text featured.

The idea of dividing listening into subskills is not a new one: Richards (1983: 228–30) put together a lengthy taxonomy. However, materials writers do not seem to have responded by designing appropriate exercise types or developmental syllabuses, and (the point at issue here) teachers do not appear to have incorporated subskills teaching into their practice. A number of coursebooks pay lip service to a skills approach by sporadic labelling (such as 'listening for information', or 'listening for gist') but do not provide systematic practice in the skills that constitute these listening types. Lynch's (1983) academic listening course is almost alone in tackling subskills, but its focus is on raising awareness of discourse features rather than practising processing techniques.<sup>1</sup>

One perhaps has to be careful with the term 'subskill'. Even with reading, it has become rather a catch-all, and Richards' (1983) listening taxonomy is extremely diverse. For the sake of methodological clarity, a skills approach to listening needs to separate out three target areas: types of listening (for gist, for information, etc.), discourse features (reference, markers, etc.), and techniques (predicting, anticipating, recognizing intonational cues, etc.). Developed in parallel, these would provide the basis for a programme which aimed to teach discrete aspects of listening rather than simply testing a global skill. Further guidelines might be provided by Rost's (1990: 152–3) classification of subskills into those relating to perception, to interpretation and to information transfer.

**Subskills exercises**

Exercises for practising listening subskills are easy to design. Many of them involve dictation, a much wider-used technique in improving listening. Exercise types are suggested below; for additional ideas on perceptual exercises, see Ur (1984: 35–46).

*Discrimination: distinguishing minimally different words*

- Ear training in minimal pairs.
- Teacher dictates minimal pairs.

*Segmentation: identifying words in continuous speech*

- Teacher dictates sentences which include contractions, weak forms, elision, assimilation, and cliticized items (e.g. 'drinka pinta milk').
- Learners transcribe a section of an authentic passage.
- Learners listen with transcript, paying attention to weakly stressed items.

*Extrapolation: working out the spelling of unrecognized words*

- Teacher dictates words in spelling groups (*laugh, cough, enough*).
- Learners guess the spellings of difficult-to-recognize cognates.
- Matching names to words on a map.

*Anticipation: working out what comes next*

- Teacher plays half a sentence, learners complete, or answer multiple-choice questions.

*Reference: relating pronouns, etc., to the items they refer to*

- Teacher pauses cassette after ambiguous referring expressions, learners say what they refer to.
- Teacher lists referring expressions/general nouns; learners listen for them and write down what they refer to.

*Monitoring for information*

- Learners monitor a long text for key words.

*Relevance: identifying important points made*

- Slot-and-filler summaries.
- Filling in tables (specific/general).
- 'Find (four) points about . . .'

### **Authentic materials**

A further area for micro-listening practice is suggested by the greatly increased use of authentic materials. An advantage usually cited for such materials is that they afford examples of the hesitations, false starts, filled and empty pauses, etc., which characterize natural speech. It is therefore common practice to introduce pieces of authentic listening at an early stage of learning, alongside scripted texts, to help learners to become familiar with the real cadences of the target language.

The handling of authentic materials at lower levels has been much discussed, and it is now established practice to grade the task rather than the text (Anderson and Lynch 1988: 80–96). To give a very simple example, the Pete Seeger song *Little Boxes* can be used with a class of beginners if it is made clear that the task is not to understand every word but simply to write down the colour words. None the less, there is inevitably a shock when learners move from a scripted text to an authentic one. The speech rhythms are different, and the conversational features referred to above will be entirely unfamiliar. For instance, the sounds 'er' and 'erm' used in filled pauses are specific to English; to

make matters worse, the first is identical to the indefinite article. There is thus a need for a programme parallel to the subskills one outlined above, to prepare lower-level learners for authentic listening by introducing them systematically to the features of natural speech. One approach is to play short sections of authentic text containing particular features, and to ask learners to transcribe them.

### **A strategic view of L2 listening**

A second argument in favour of using authentic materials is that learners need practice in the real-life task of extracting meaning from utterances where much of the language is beyond their current state of knowledge. This leads to a type of listening so different from that occurring in a listening lesson based on carefully graded and scripted texts, it will be argued, as to demand a different methodology.

A new awareness has developed of the extent to which L2 listening is a strategic activity. In real-life encounters, listeners succeed in extracting much less information from the speech stream than we once assumed on the basis of their performance with graded materials. Indeed, a piece of classroom research by the author (unpublished) indicated that many common words in an authentic narrative passage went unrecognized by more than 75% of a group of learners at lower intermediate level.<sup>2</sup> To compensate for this lack of adequate 'bottom-up' information, L2 listeners form inferences: they use their knowledge of the context to make intelligent guesses about the ideas which link the sometimes dislocated words which they have been able to recognize.

This process can be seen as a variant of one that occurs when listening in one's first language. If a conversation is going on in conditions of noise, there seems to be some kind of automatic trade-off between the amount of information that is available from the speech stream and the extent to which we rely on clues from the context. (This interactive-compensatory mechanism was first discussed by Stanovich (1980) in relation to reading.) The language teacher's task is to ensure that the kind of inferring strategies that we apply in L1 (Rost 1990: 62–89) are adapted to L2.

### **Strategy training**

A number of North American listening specialists (e.g. Mendelsohn 1994: 36–47, Chamot 1995: 19) have argued that listening strategies can and should be taught. The recommendation has been that we should teach them explicitly and (along the lines proposed here for subskills teaching) singly. Individual strategies are often identified by reference to a classification system formulated by Oxford (1990: 18–21).

However, some caution seems to be called for. Firstly, it has not been conclusively demonstrated that this kind of strategy training works. Attempts to teach strategies one at a time on the analysis–synthesis principle have not necessarily led to greater overall listening competence. Of twelve pieces of research mentioned by Rubin (1994: 213–5) and Chamot (1995: 18–24) which involved explicit training in compensatory strategies, only two produced unambiguous findings that

improvement had occurred. This partly reflects the difficulty of this kind of research, in particular the problems of assessing listening competence pre- and post-training. But there is also some evidence that, after training, learners who start off as weak strategy users continue to have trouble choosing appropriate strategies for a task, or combining two or more strategies.

Secondly, the classification system employed in these proposals does not distinguish between listening strategies which are used for extracting meaning ('communication strategies') and those which are used for the purposes of acquiring new language ('learning strategies'). Early writers on language strategies (Færch and Kasper 1983: 16, 21–2, 67, 102) warned against mixing the two, and it will be very obvious that one can be applied without the other. For example, a learner might puzzle out the meaning of a partially understood set of street directions without necessarily learning anything about how to provide such directions. A training which combines the two types of strategy may suit the ESL classroom but does not seem appropriate for the EFL classroom, where it can create conflicting task demands.

Thirdly, willingness to use strategies appears to reflect individual temperament. Learner factors play an important part, and a learner who is a risk-taker in speaking is also likely to be a risk-taker in listening. A view could be taken that the aim of strategy training should not be to teach a uniform set of procedures but to encourage the reluctant strategy-user and restrain the rash.

One can also question how effective it is to teach techniques explicitly which are, by definition, largely unconscious. It is perhaps not surprising that learners who are taught the principles of strategy use find some difficulty in applying this knowledge to real-life tasks.

All this does not mean that the listening teacher should ignore the true nature of L2 listening and the part played by compensatory strategies. The solution proposed here is that we rethink the structure of our lessons so that activities undertaken in the classroom reflect more closely what happens in a real-life listening encounter. We should aim to incorporate into our teaching repertoire the formation and testing of informed guesses, with a view to ensuring that learners come to accept the process as normal and not as a mark of their inadequacy as listeners.

From time to time, the listening teacher might introduce a lesson which models strategy use:

- 1 Write down as many words as possible from the speech stream. Decide how certain you are about each one.
- 2 Form guesses as to the ideas which link these words. Make use of your knowledge of the world, the topic of the text, the speaker, the text so far, and similar speech events. Share your guesses with a fellow learner.
- 3 Check your guesses when the section of the text is replayed.
- 4 Check your guesses against the next section of the text.

This sequence implies a much less interventionist stance by the teacher than that usually adopted in listening lessons. Stages 3 and 4 are particularly important. The failure to check hypotheses seems to be the source of much breakdown of understanding in foreign-language listening, when guesses become treated as certainties instead of being weighed against new evidence as it comes in.

***Practising skills,  
modelling  
strategies***

It may seem perverse to argue at one point that listening should be broken into a series of separate subskills and at another that strategies should be modelled in relation to a task rather than taught separately. But there are important differences between skills and strategies, as characterized here. Subskills are seen as competencies which native listeners possess and which non-natives need to acquire in relation to the language they are learning. They involve mastering the auditory phonetics, the word-identification techniques, the patterns of reference, and the distribution of information which occur in the target language. Strategies, by contrast, are strictly compensatory: as the listener's listening ability improves, they are required less and less. Because such compensatory strategies are already available in L1, the goal is to ensure that they are transferred into L2 and applied in a controlled way.

The distinction made here between subskills and strategies would seem to address one of Rost's reservations (1990: 150–1) about the desirability of breaking listening into discrete components: 'Listing all possible procedures typically fails to clarify the distinction between psycho-motor skills that can be developed for language-use situations and knowledge that is part of a person's general analytic competence.'

Nevertheless, there are a number of strategic techniques which can indeed be practised individually, using the kinds of micro-listening approach proposed for subskills. These include: using knowledge of the topic to predict what will be heard; working out gist by identifying key words; learning to recognize 'new' information marked by sentence stress; using markers as guides to changes of topic; and handling unknown words by ignoring them or switching to a higher level of generality.

***Conclusion***

This article has suggested that, in current practice, we focus too much on the product of listening and too little on the process. The solution it proposes features various types of micro-listening exercise, which can be employed prognostically as part of listening training or diagnostically, in response to evidence of breakdowns of understanding. The exercises fulfill three different purposes: equipping learners with the subskills that a competent native listener could be expected to possess; familiarizing learners with the features of natural conversational speech; and training learners in some smaller-scale strategy techniques. Of course, these skills and micro-strategies practised in isolation must later be combined and applied to a longer text. However, it has been suggested that major listening strategies involving the creating and checking of inferences are best modelled—incorporated into the pattern of the listening lesson—rather than taught individually.

The distinction between skills and strategies should not be too narrowly applied. At the later stages of learning, some compensatory strategies will develop into good 'top-down' listening techniques of the kind used by native listeners (for example, making bridging inferences, establishing expectations as to what will be heard, or switching between levels of generality). However, it is submitted that the distinction is a useful one, that will help us to specify more precisely what we expect to achieve in the listening classroom.

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### Notes

- 1 Since this article was written, new titles in J.C. Richards, *Tactics for Listening*, a course based upon subskills, have been published (New York: Oxford University Press 1997).
- 2 It should be stressed that the issue here was recognition rather than comprehension. The task required listeners to write down the last four words before each of several pauses inserted into the passage. Native listeners recorded recognition levels of 95-100% with the same material. The passage used was taken from M. Underwood, *What a Story!* (Oxford University Press, 1976).

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### The author

**John Field** is currently doing PhD research on listening at the University of Cambridge. He is a materials writer and teacher trainer with experience in Europe, the Middle East, the Far East, and Africa. He has written secondary school coursebooks for Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong, and is the author of a beginners series on BBC English by Radio. He worked for two years in the People's Republic of China, designing distance learning materials for TV. He is Co-ordinator of the IATEFL Research SIG.  
E-mail: <jcf1000@cam.ac.uk>