

‘Teacher, the tape is too fast!’

Extensive listening in ELT

Willy A. Renandya and Thomas S.C. Farrell

For many years, research effort has been devoted to understanding the nature of listening strategies and how listening strategies used by good listeners can be taught to so-called ineffective listeners. As a result of this line of research, strategy training activities have now become a standard feature of most modern listening coursebooks. However, in this article, we maintain that given the lack of evidence of success with this approach to teaching lower proficiency EFL learners and the fact that strategy training places a heavy burden on teachers, an extensive listening approach in the same vein as an extensive reading approach should be adopted.

Introduction

Realizing that she could not understand very much of what was happening in her listening class, Jing Erl (a pseudonym) said to her teacher in halting English, ‘Teacher, the tape is too fast and I can’t catch the words’. Jing Erl is probably not alone. Many EFL learners, especially those with lower proficiency levels in the language, find that of all the skills areas of English, it is listening that is most difficult for them (Bacon 1989; Farrell and Mallard 2006). As Bacon (op. cit.: 544) points out:

the learner may approach the listening task with more affective baggage: the speech signal may cause the hearer added apprehension since it cannot be touched or held the way a written text can.

Indeed, listening involves:

not only correctly interpreting incoming speech but also responding appropriately to the speaker, especially in face-to-face conversations where listeners must be able to contribute verbally to the discourse. (Farrell and Mallard op. cit.: 338).

Consequently, when EFL students are asked to listen to a tape, they have no opportunities to interact with speakers and thus no opportunities to pick up on any non-verbal cues that might be used. Thus, their sense of listening difficulty comes not only from not being able to catch the sounds or the words but also from missing the gist or important details of the spoken text. Not surprisingly then, they also find completing the teacher-prepared follow-up tasks and worksheets frustratingly hard to do.

In this article, we suggest that instead of hoping that students will eventually develop their listening skills by themselves, teachers should actively

consider why students with lower English proficiency levels have difficulty comprehending listening input. We begin with a reflection on what makes spoken text difficult for students to comprehend.

Features of speech

What are the features that make spoken text particularly difficult for beginning learners of English? Listening researchers (for example Buck 1995; Field 2003) believe that the following can cause comprehension problems.

Speech is fast

For EFL learners, a text spoken at normal speed, or even at a slow speed, is usually perceived as being very or even too fast by beginning language learners. This is important information because research has suggested that speech rate is correlated with comprehension success (Buck *ibid.*). For example, any increase in speech rate tends to result in a decrease in comprehension, and when speech rate reaches a critical level, comprehension becomes all but impossible. What we need to be aware of is that for many EFL learners, the critical level (the level of speech rate above which comprehension becomes impossible) is normally much lower than that for the more advanced learners.

Speech is variable

When words are woven together in speech, they often take on different forms. Sometimes the words are fully articulated, but most of the time, they undergo radical phonological changes. It is quite natural for speakers to modify, drop, and add sounds when speaking. Because of this, EFL learners find it very difficult to recognize these words because they sound so different from when they are pronounced in isolation. For example, 'What is up?' may be reduced to 'Sup?' where the question word 'what' and the vowel sound /i/ in 'is' are dropped.

Word boundaries are blurry

In speech, words tend to blend with the surrounding words, thus making it difficult to clearly perceive the boundary between words. For example, the first part of the phrase 'the standard the hotel achieves' may be perceived by learners as 'stand at the hotel', thus resulting in a comprehension breakdown (Field *op. cit.*). This, of course, adds to the processing burden of the learners.

Speech has to be processed in real time

If we miss what has just been said, there is usually no going back to it. In reading, we can pause, reread parts of the text that we do not understand, and skip some of the words or sentences or even a whole paragraph. In speaking, we can simply ask the interlocutor to repeat the sentence. However, this is not the case with listening. We have little control over what the speaker is saying and the speed at which the speaker conveys his or her message.

The above speech features pose a serious problem for EFL learners when listening to tape-recorded speech. Zeng (2007) in his study with EFL college students in China, for example, found that speech rate is the most important source of his students' listening problems (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Top ten listening
problems

	Sources of listening problems	%
1	Speaking rate	100
2	Distraction	95
3	Unable to recognize words they knew	90
4	New vocabulary	85
5	Missing subsequent input	80
6	Nervousness	70
7	Sentence complexity	60
8	Background knowledge	55
9	Anxiety and frustration	45
10	Unfamiliar pronunciation	40

Every student reported that the most important source of their listening comprehension problem was the fast rate of speech. Not surprisingly, the second most important source of their listening problem was ‘distraction’. If the speech rate is too fast and the students cannot catch the words, they naturally get distracted and will be unable to continue to process the information. The third most difficult problem gives further confirmation that the fast speech rate, along with the other features of speech discussed above, made it difficult for the students to recognize the words that they actually knew. As a result, they were not able to comprehend the text.

Listening strategies

It is clear from the above that EFL students’ listening problems are related to perception problems, namely they are not able to recognize words in speech and to process the text fast enough for them to attend to the higher level processes of comprehension and inference.

However, listening researchers and methodologists seem to give scant attention to the kinds of perception problems that beginning EFL learners face (but see Field 2003 and Wilson 2003 for an excellent discussion on perceptual problems in foreign language listening). The general consensus seems to be that:

- perception is a low-level problem that the students can deal with on their own and
- teaching students higher level cognitive and metacognitive strategies (such as inferencing) and self-monitoring strategies will solve students’ listening problems.

Thus, for the past 20 years or so, considerable research effort has been devoted to understanding the nature of listening strategies and how listening strategies used by good listeners can be taught to so-called ineffective listeners. As a result of this line of research, strategy training activities have now become a standard feature of most modern listening coursebooks. Different authors recommend different procedures of learner strategy training, but most would include a presentation–practice–evaluation cycle (for example Littlejohn 2008). In addition, the following steps are usually recommended in a standard strategy training activity (Littlejohn *ibid.*: 69, citing Grenfell and Harris 1999):

- raise students’ awareness
- help them brainstorm the strategies used

- model the strategies
- have them practise the strategies
- guide them in selecting the strategies that address their particular needs
- evaluate their progress and strategy use.

Some authors have suggested that in order for strategy training to have any beneficial effect, it should be implemented intensively and systematically. This, of course, places a heavy demand on the teachers because they will need to know at least the following to carry out strategy training:

- they need to know the theories and principles behind strategy training
- they need to know how to select the strategies that the students need to learn
- they need to know the order in which these strategies should be presented and practised
- they need to know how to integrate these strategies into the curriculum
- they need to know how much time should be allocated for strategy training.

These requirements may be difficult for many EFL teachers to handle, as most will have different levels of training (some may have none) in the use of learning strategies. We maintain that these requirements are rather unrealistic and burdensome for the majority of teachers given that they have so much to accomplish in language lessons. In addition, there is not a clear one-to-one correspondence between teaching listening strategies and an increase in listening comprehension as many other variables come into play as well. For example, what may be an effective listening strategy for one student may not be the case for another. Yet, strategy training remains intuitively appealing for many in the profession because it is said that all teachers need to do is identify the kinds of listening strategies that good listeners use and teach these to less proficient students so that they too can become good listeners. After years of research into listening strategy training, is there enough evidence to endorse its implementation in EFL language classrooms? The simple answer is no.

Because of the lack of clear evidence, a number of EFL teaching methodologists have recently expressed some reservations about the use of substantial instructional time for strategy training. McDonough (2006) and Littlejohn (2008), for example, have voiced their particular concerns related to the 'cost' of this type of training, suggesting that strategy training may have an 'opportunity cost' for learning language in that it takes time away from the actual language teaching in the classroom. In addition, Ridgway (2000: 179) is particularly critical of the strategy-based approach to teaching listening, arguing that 'in listening, working from text, or from texts in general, may be a more productive way of approaching comprehension than working from the notion of strategies'. He maintains that what students need most is ample practice in actual listening so that they develop skills and automaticity in processing oral language.

We also believe that an overemphasis on strategy training may undermine the value of practice, which plays a critical role in the acquisition of procedural knowledge in language learning like listening skills. We agree with Buck (op. cit.: 119) that what EFL students need most, at least at the

early stage of learning, is 'knowledge of how to access the word meaning and add it quickly and efficiently to their developing interpretation'. One effective way to enable students to develop fast automatic processing of oral language is through extensive listening, which is the topic of the next section.

Extensive listening

Reading researchers (for example Adams 1998; Day and Bamford 1998) have now confirmed the importance of extensive reading in the acquisition of reading skills and that 'reading is best learned through reading' (Adams op.cit.: 73). The evidence for extensive reading is strong: it can improve students' word recognition skills, vocabulary, reading comprehension, fluency, and general language proficiency. In addition, students also develop more positive attitudes towards reading and language learning in general (see summaries of research on the impacts of extensive reading at www.extensivereading.net). What is amazing is that the students obtain all these benefits by simply doing something that is pleasurable. They just read anything that they find enjoyable. The only condition is that they should choose reading materials that they can understand on their own and that they read a lot of these materials. In other words, they do a lot of practice in comprehension, not practice in *incomprehension* as many EFL students often complain about their skills- or strategies-based reading lessons.

Can we learn from the research into extensive reading and apply the idea in teaching listening? Is it possible to teach listening through extensive listening? Extensive listening is defined here to mean all types of listening activities that allow learners to receive a lot of comprehensible and enjoyable listening input. These activities can be teacher-directed dictations or read-alouds or self-directed listening for pleasure that can be done outside the classroom. The key consideration here is that learners get to do a lot of meaningful listening practice. We believe that just like reading, listening is best learnt through listening. We believe that extensive listening might just be the kind of approach that may help EFL students deal with their listening problems.

Evidence is emerging that simply listening to comprehensible materials through simple and familiar classroom activities such as dictation and reading aloud can improve EFL students' listening skills. For example, Kiany and Shiramiry (2002) conducted an experiment that investigated the effect of frequent dictation on the listening comprehension of elementary EFL learners in Iran. Two groups of 30 students received the same amount of listening materials based on the Headway Elementary Series. The experimental group who received dictation exercises made significantly larger learning gains in the listening test than the control group. The book flood study in the Fiji Island conducted by Elley and Mangubhai (1983) provides further evidence for the positive impact of an interactive reading aloud activity (called the shared book methodology in the study) on the experimental students' listening, speaking, and reading skills. Given the results of Elley and Mangubhai's study, it is surprising that the shared book approach has not been particularly popular in foreign or second language listening classrooms.

More recently, Zhang (2005) provided her middle school students in China with extensive listening activities in which they listened to a large amount of comprehensible and interesting stories read aloud by the teacher. During the read-aloud sessions, the teacher made sure that the speed was appropriate to beginner levels of English and that the language was comprehensible so that the students could follow the stories fully. At the end of the six-week long experiment (approximately 42 hours of listening sessions), Zhang's extensive listening students performed significantly better in the cloze and recall listening tests than the control students who received intensive and systematic listening strategy training. Not only did the extensive listening students outperform the strategy-based students on the receptive measures, they also outscored the control students on the picture storytelling test—a measure that required a productive use of the language.

After the experiment, the extensive listening students reported that they were better able to understand because they were able to 'catch' the words more quickly. Excerpt 1, translated from a student's interview response in Mandarin, is representative of the kind of improvement in listening that the students experienced:

Excerpt 1

... at the beginning of the extensive listening programme, there were many words that sounded familiar to me. But I just couldn't think of their meanings immediately. When I tried to recall their meanings, I always missed the sentences that came after. Now I feel that I am better at catching the words in the sentences. The various activities in class gave me an opportunity to listen to the same story a number of times.

In contrast, many of the strategy-based students expressed their frustration of having to learn and apply strategies when they were still struggling with speech rate and word recognition. Excerpts 2 and 3 (also translated from Mandarin) demonstrate their difficulty.

Excerpt 2

The speed is too fast for me: I cannot catch up with the speed. I can only catch a few words that appear in the sentences here and there, but they do not give me much information. Maybe they are not the key words. I am really busy trying to catch the words and do not have much time left to think about other things ...

Excerpt 3

I've hardly had the chance to use the strategies I've been taught because I have great difficulty in recognizing the words in the sentences. I always try to catch the words when I listen, but it is so hard for me. The strategies may be good, but they are not so useful for me. I mean it doesn't really help me when I listen. I feel that it is impossible for me to balance these two things well at the same time. I think I first need to attend to the most important thing for me ...

Thus, in the absence of strong evidence in favour of strategy-based listening instruction, we suggest that we should (re)look at our arsenal of tried and

tested methodological tools. Simple and enjoyable listening activities such as dictation and teacher read-alouds, narrow listening (listening to texts of the same topics and genres), repeated listening, and listening while reading (for example audio books) are at least as good as, or may even be superior to, strategy-based teaching. More importantly, these activities are by far more enjoyable for the majority of EFL students.

Finding materials

But where do we get access to listening materials that are appropriate for lower level EFL students? For schools with financial resources, they can purchase graded audiobooks from international publishers. For those with minimal resources, they can try online listening materials. Waring (2008) suggests two very good online resources:

- 1 ELLLO (English Listening Lesson Library Online, <http://www.ello.org>), which contains hundreds of free online materials and activities for teachers and students.
- 2 Spotlight Radio (<http://www.spotlightradio.net/listen/>), which uses a slower rate of speech appropriate for lower level students. Students can listen and read the script at the same time.

There are other online resources that are suitable for lower proficiency learners of English. Some of these are listed below:

- 1 Voice of America Special English (<http://www.voanews.com/learningenglish/home/>), which contains a lot of world news read in simple and clear English.
- 2 BBC World Service (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/multimedia/>), which may be more suitable for intermediate level students.
- 3 ESL Podcasts (<http://a4esl.org/podcasts/>), which contains podcasts on various topics that use a slower rate of speech and simple language.
- 4 YouTube videos (<http://www.manythings.org/b/e/>), which contains hundreds of ESL videos on various interesting topics.
- 5 Storyline Online (<http://www.storylineonline.net/>), which contains a lot of stories read aloud by professional artists.

Conclusion

Our main job as teachers of foreign language listening is to help our students develop procedural knowledge, i.e. knowledge about how to process spoken language with ease and automaticity. While we may need to devote some time teaching students some declarative knowledge—the *what* of listening (for example grammar, vocabulary, features of spoken language, and yes, some comprehension skills and strategies)—the bulk of our classroom time should be used to provide our students with lots of listening practice, the kind of practice in which they actually listen to a lot of meaningful, enjoyable, and comprehensible spoken text.

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The authors

Willy A. Renandya is a language teacher educator with extensive teaching experience in Southeast Asia. He currently teaches Applied Linguistics courses at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is series editor (with Jack Richards) of the RELC Portfolio series.

Email: willy.renandya@nie.edu.sg

Thomas S. C. Farrell is a professor of Applied Linguistics at Brock University, Canada. His professional interests include reflective practice and language teacher education and development. He is a series editor for the Language Teacher Research series for TESOL, USA. His most recent book is *Reflective Language Teaching: From Research to Practice* (Continuum Press, 2008).

Email: tfarrell@brocku.ca