The Changing Face of Listening

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**INTRODUCTION**

There was a time when listening in language classes was perceived chiefly as a means of presenting new grammar. Dialogues on tape provided examples of structures to be learned, and this was the only type of listening practice most learners received. Ironically, much effort was spent on training learners to express themselves orally. Sight was lost of the fact that one is (to say the least) rather handicapped in conversation unless one can follow what is being said, as well as speak.

From the late 1960s, practitioners recognised the importance of listening and began to set aside time for practising the skill. A relatively standard format for the listening lesson developed at this time:

- **Pre-listening**
  - Pre-teaching of all important new vocabulary in the passage

- **Listening**
  - Extensive listening (followed by general questions establishing context)
  - Intensive listening (followed by detailed comprehension questions)

- **Post-listening**
  - Analysis of the language in the text (*Why did the speaker use the present perfect?*)
  - Listen and repeat: teacher pauses the tape, learners repeat words

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Over the past several decades, teachers have modified this procedure considerably. It is worthwhile reminding ourselves of the reasons for these changes. In doing so, we may come to question the thinking behind them and/or conclude that the changes do not go far enough.

**PRE-LISTENING**

**CRITICAL WORDS**

Pre-teaching of vocabulary has now largely been discontinued. 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 will not be familiar. Granted, it may be necessary for the teacher to present three or four critical words at the beginning of the listening lesson – but ‘critical’ implies absolutely indispensable key words without which any understanding of the text would be impossible.

**PRE-LISTENING ACTIVITIES**

Some kind of pre-listening activity is now usual, involving brainstorming vocabulary, reviewing areas of grammar, or discussing the topic of the listening text. This phase of the lesson usually lasts longer than it should. A long pre-listening session shortens the time available for listening. It can also be counterproductive. Extended discussion of the topic can result in much of the content of the listening passage being anticipated. Revising language points in advance encourages learners to focus on examples of these particular items when listening – sometimes at the expense of global meaning.

One should set two simple aims for the pre-listening period:

1. to provide sufficient context to match what would be available in real life
2. to create motivation (perhaps by asking learners to speculate on what they will hear)

These can be achieved in as little as 5 minutes.

**LISTENING**

**THE INTENSIVE/EXTENSIVE DISTINCTION**

Most practitioners have retained the extensive/intensive distinction. On a similar principle, international examinations usually specify that the recording is to be played twice. Some theorists argue that this is unnatural because in real life one gets only one hearing. But the whole situation of listening to a cassette in a language classroom is, after all, artificial. Furthermore, listening to a strange voice, especially one speaking in a foreign language, demands a process of normalisation – of adjusting to the pitch, speed, and quality of the voice. An initial period of extensive listening allows for this.

**PRESET QUESTIONS**

There have been changes in the way that comprehension is checked. We recognise that learners listen in an unfocused way if questions are not set until after the passage has been heard. Unsure of what they will be asked, they cannot judge the level of detail that will be required of them. By presetting comprehension questions, we can ensure that learners listen with a clear purpose, and that their answers are not dependent on memory.
LISTENING TASKS

More effective than traditional comprehension questions is the current practice of providing a task where learners do something with the information they have extracted from the text. Tasks can involve labelling (e.g., buildings on a map), selecting (e.g., choosing a film from three trailers), drawing (e.g., symbols on a weather map), form filling (e.g., a hotel registration form), and completing a grid.

Activities of this kind model the type of response that might be given to a listening experience in real life. They also provide a more reliable way of checking understanding. A major difficulty with listening work is that it is difficult to establish how much a learner has understood without involving other skills. For example, if learners give a wrong answer to a written comprehension question, it may be because they have not understood the question (reading) or because they cannot formulate an answer (writing) rather than because their listening is at fault. The advantage of listening tasks is that they can keep extraneous reading or writing to a minimum.

A third benefit is that tasks demand individual responses. Filling in forms, labelling diagrams, or making choices obliges every learner to try to make something of what he or she hears. This is especially effective if the class is asked to work in pairs.

AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

Another development has been the increased use of authentic materials. Recordings of spontaneous speech expose learners to the rhythms of natural everyday English in a way that scripted materials cannot, however good the actors. Furthermore, authentic passages where the language has not been graded to reflect the learners’ level of English afford a listening experience much closer to a real-life one. It is vital that students of a language be given practice in dealing with texts where they understand only part of what is said.

For these two reasons (naturalness of language and real-life listening experience), it is advisable to introduce authentic materials early on in a language course. In general, students are not daunted or discouraged by authentic materials – provided they are told in advance not to expect to understand everything. Indeed, they find it motivating to discover that they can extract information from an ungraded passage. The essence of the approach is as follows: Instead of simplifying the language of the text, simplify the task that is demanded of the student. With a text above the language level of the class, one demands only shallow comprehension. One might play a recording of a real-life stall holder in a market and simply ask the class, to write down all the vegetables that are mentioned.

Students may have difficulty in adjusting to authentic conversational materials after hearing scripted ones. It is worthwhile introducing your learners systematically to those features of conversational speech which they may find unfamiliar – hesitations, stuttering, false starts, and long, loosely structured sentences. Choose a few examples of a single feature from a piece of authentic speech, play them to the class, and ask them to try to transcribe them.

STRATEGIC LISTENING

The type of foreign language listening that occurs in a real-life encounter or in response to authentic material is very different from the type that occurs with a scripted passage whose language has been graded to fit the learner’s level. In real life, listening to a foreign language is a strategic activity. Nonnative listeners recognise only part of what they hear (my research suggests a much smaller percentage than we imagine) and have to make guesses which link these fragmented pieces of text. This is a process in which our learners need practice and guidance. Cautious students need to be encouraged to take risks and to make inferences
based on the words they have managed to identify. Natural risk takers need to be encouraged to check their guesses against new evidence as it comes in from the speaker. And all learners need to be shown that making guesses is not a sign of failure.

**Post-listening**

We no longer spend time examining the grammar of the listening text; that reflected a typically structuralist view of listening as a means of reinforcing recently learned material. However, it remains worthwhile to pick out any functional language and draw learners’ attention to it. (‘Susan threatened John. Do you remember the words she used?’). Listening texts often provide excellent examples of functions such as apologising, inviting, refusing, suggesting, and so on.

The ‘listen-and-repeat’ phase has been dropped as well – on the argument that it is tantamount to parroting. This is not entirely fair: In fact, it tested the ability of learners to achieve lexical segmentation – to identify individual words within the stream of sound. But one can understand that it does not accord well with current communicative thinking.

As part of post-listening, one can ask learners to infer the meaning of new words from the contexts in which they appear – just as they do in reading. The procedure is to write the target words on the board, replay the sentences containing them, and ask learners to work out their meanings. Some teachers are deterred from employing this vocabulary-inferring exercise by the difficulty of finding the right places on the cassette. A simple solution is to copy the sentences to be used onto a second cassette.

To summarise, the format of a good listening lesson today differs considerably from that of four decades ago:

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<thead>
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<th>Pre-listening</th>
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<td>Set context. Create motivation.</td>
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**Listening**

- Extensive listening (followed by questions on context, attitude)
- Preset task/Preset questions
- Intensive listening
- Checking answers

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-listening</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examining functional language</td>
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<td>Inferring vocabulary meaning</td>
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**Where Do We Go from Here?**

Listening methodology has changed a great deal, but some would argue that many of the changes have been cosmetic, and that what is really needed is a rethinking of the aims and structure of the listening lesson. The following are some of the limitations of our present approach.
WE STILL TEND TO TEST LISTENING RATHER THAN TEACH IT

The truth is that we have little option but to use some kind of checking procedure to assess the extent of understanding that has been achieved. What is wrong is not what we do, but how we use the results. We tend to judge successful listening simplistically in terms of correct answers to comprehension questions and tasks. We overlook the fact that there may be many ways of achieving a correct answer. One learner may have identified two words and made an intelligent guess; another may have constructed a meaning on the basis of 100% recognition of what was said.

We focus on the product of listening when we should be interested in the process – what is going on in the heads of our learners. Wrong answers are more informative than right ones; it makes sense to spend time finding out where and how understanding broke down. On this view, the main aim of a listening lesson is diagnostic: identifying listening problems and putting them right. Armed with evidence of why a misunderstanding occurred, teachers can design remedial microlistening exercises which tackle the cause of the problem. Here, dictation is a particularly useful tool. Suppose that learners find it difficult to recognise weak forms (/wəz/ for ‘was’, /tə/ for ‘to’, /υ/ for ‘who’). A series of sentences can be dictated containing examples of the weak forms, to ensure that students interpret them correctly the next time they encounter them.

Remedial exercises should not be restricted to low-level skills such as word recognition; they can also be used to develop higher-level ones (distinguishing important pieces of information, anticipating, noticing topic markers, and so on).

A diagnostic aim for the listening lesson implies a change in lesson shape. Instead of the kind of long pre-listening period which some teachers employ, it is much more fruitful to allow time for an extended post-listening period in which learners’ problems can be identified and tackled.

WE DO NOT PRACTISE THE KIND OF LISTENING THAT TAKES PLACE IN REAL LIFE

If we are to use authentic texts, it is pointless to operate on the assumption that learners will identify most of the words they hear. We need a new type of lesson, which models much more closely the kind of process that takes place in a real-life situation where understanding of what is said is less than perfect. The process adopted by nonnative listeners seems to be:

- Identify the words in a few fragmented sections of the text. Feel relatively certain about some, less certain about others.
- Make inferences linking the parts of the text about which you feel most confident.
- Check those inferences against what comes next.

This kind of strategy is not confined to low-level learners; my evidence suggests that it is used up to the highest levels. One of the most dangerous mistakes we make is to assume that because students have a good knowledge of vocabulary or grammar, they can necessarily recognise the words and structures they know when they encounter them in a natural spoken context.

We need to reshape some (not all) of our listening lessons to reflect this reality. Let us encourage learners to listen and write down the words they understand; to form and discuss inferences; to listen again and revise their inferences; then to check them against what the speaker says next. In doing this, we not only give them practice in the kind of listening they
are likely to do in real life, we also make them realise that guessing is not a sign of failure, but something that most people resort to when listening to a foreign language.

**LISTENING WORK IS OFTEN LIMITED IN SCOPE AND ISOLATING IN EFFECT**

Our current methodology reinforces the natural instinct of the teacher to provide answers. We need to design a listening lesson where the teacher has a much less interventionist role, encouraging learners to listen and relisten and to do as much of the work as possible for themselves. On the other hand, we should also recognise the extent to which listening can prove an isolating activity, in which the liveliest and most vocal class can quickly become a group of separate individuals, each locked up in their own auditory efforts.

The solution is to play a short passage, then get learners to compare their understanding of it in pairs. Encourage them to disagree with each other – thus increasing motivation for a second listening. Play the passage again, and let the pairs revise their views, then share their interpretations with the class. *Resist the temptation to tell them who is right and who is wrong.* When the whole class has argued about the accuracy of different versions, play the text again and ask them to make up their minds, each student providing evidence to support his or her point of view. In this way, listening becomes a much more interactive activity, with learners listening because they have a vested interest in justifying their own explanation of the text. By listening and relistening, they improve the accuracy with which they listen and, by discussing possible interpretations, they improve their ability to construct representations of meaning from what they hear.

The methodology of the listening lesson has come a long way, but let us not be complacent. Unless we address the three problem areas just outlined, our teaching will remain hidebound and we will miss our true aim – which is not simply to provide practice, but to produce better and more confident listeners.