

Teaching Listening in ELT: Can manipulation of bottom-up processing tasks enhance student engagement with rapid or authentic speech?

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Abstract: There are two views of the listening process in ELT literature. In the bottom-up view of listening, we create meaning from the speech of others by perceiving words in the sound we hear until we have understood. In the top-down view, we use these perceived words as prompts to recreate the speakers' message by employing our own background knowledge, expectations and inferences. The two views can be combined and regarded as separate mechanisms in one process. However, if EFL students are listening to authentic texts or rapid speech, can they perceive words and their boundaries, in the bottom-up mechanism with sufficient clarity to avoid being overwhelmed, and remain engaged with the text? **Aim:** This paper describes how I typically attempt to enhance student engagement with authentic or rapid spoken texts without any pre-teaching that risks students anticipating content and obviating the need to develop their listening skills. **Method:** A text was created to ensure that either the speed or authenticity of speech would be the greatest impediment to comprehension. Groups of students were then given simple speaking strategies for responding to the text. Following initial responses from the groups, tasks were modified to maintain students' focus on the characteristics of actual speech. **Observations:** In a listening exercise where the speed or authenticity of spoken text was the greatest cause of difficulty, manipulation of tasks as they developed, led to increased student engagement and improved accuracy in responses.

Key Words : English Language Teaching, bottom-up processing, extensive listening, oronyms

Introduction

The research described in this paper is a small-scale study which began with an interest in my own personal teaching context. As I teach English in structured programs at Japanese universities I believe it could be of interest to teaching professionals in similar situations. My interest in listening stems from my general interest in the two receptive skills: listening and reading. As these skills operate in the mind, students generally need a degree of competence in the productive skills (speaking and writing) to

evidence them. This is not always a bad thing – precisely because language skills operate in unison in the communicative situations for which many students prepare. However, a drift in emphasis to the productive skills is problematic if it takes time and energy from listening practice, especially if the course is one chosen by students for no other reason than to improve their listening ability.

A second problem with listening exercises is how to build participation confidence, or the confidence to venture an answer that is obviously not quite correct yet. It can be extremely difficult

to have students state out loud to a class what they have just said in a small group, but this type of participation is vital for two reasons: it allows us to pool input from the whole class, and it builds student confidence if they can be shown how close they have come to decoding speech – even if they haven't 'unlocked' a coherent text.

My background reading into listening, both within and beyond ELT literature, has also heightened my curiosity regarding this skill. Reading Pinker's (1994) account of how "each moment of sound must have several phonemes packed into it that our brains somehow unpack" (p. 162), makes teaching the skill to non-native speakers seem a daunting task thereafter. Fortunately, within ELT literature numerous practitioners have described their own concerns, dilemmas and attempted solutions to the problems of teaching listening. These have influenced my own practices in listening classes, and have resulted in three questions that I continue to ask myself. They flow consecutively from each other, though their solutions overlap. They are the following:

1. How can I consistently, and demonstrably, provide students with learning opportunities where the primary focus is on listening and not other skills?
2. How can I prepare students to get the most from listening tasks without compromising the usefulness of the exercise by encouraging them to anticipate what they will hear beforehand?
3. How can I plan or manipulate a sequence of tasks in such a way that increasingly difficult demands on bottom-up processing enhance student engagement with texts?

The way in which I answer these questions shapes my approach to listening classes. It provides me with task objectives, and practical applications that result in enjoyable learning opportunities for students. They are described in the remainder of this paper.

1. A Primary Focus on Listening

1.1 Defining the skill

A teacher must have a clear conception of what listening is to focus on the skill. Crystal (1997) distinguishes listening from hearing stating "When we begin to hear attentively we are said to be listening" (p. 145). This is a precise definition as a starting principle. Vandergrift (1999) defines the complexity of decoding speech stating that, among other things, a listener must "understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance" (p. 168). This definition is one that immediately has implications for teaching because it is a succinct warning; it makes clear that decoding speech is an impressive task, and one performed in real time. It persuades me to consider my approach from that point, and to have good reasons for any classroom methodology I employ.

1.2 Pinpointing Requirements

The first thing I do to increase the listening focus is purge the other receptive skill from classroom exercises: I provide no reading material for students to follow while listening. I also refrain from requesting written responses – though I nearly always allow writing materials for students' own use as individuals or, more often, in groups. Finally, I minimize the speaking requirement by supplying students with the simplest possible response strategy, for as Helgesen (2003) warns "if students get the answer wrong, you don't know if they really didn't understand, or if they did understand, but didn't know how to respond" (p 31).

After some trial and error, my current requirement is to consistently simplify listening tasks by putting students into groups and telling them to tell me what they heard whenever I complete a stretch of text. I then write "I heard ... " on the whiteboard and tell them that this is

how they should begin all their responses. In this manner, I can be sure that any misunderstanding is a listening problem. I can also respond positively to errors because although students may be wrong about the content of the text, they cannot be wrong as such about what they heard. As tasks develop, I may manipulate the task. However, they will invariably start in this format.

1.3 Bottom-up Emphasis

The simplified requirements described above can be used with different types of texts and, at least at the outset, different types of listening exercise: a ninety-minute class might include a short video with soundtrack, independent soundtrack or dictation exercise. I want bottom-up processing to provide students with their initial data, but it might be asked: Can any tasks be referred to as entirely bottom-up? After all, if top-down processing of speech is a real thing, then it should be impossible to prevent, or somehow 'switch off'. I would agree with that, but I simply mean here that I do not want students to begin by employing strategies like guessing and inferring, and in the event that they mishear words, I expect them to have a continual bottom-up challenge. The evidence that this happens to students in my classes emerges from an analysis of their errors which seem similar to those reported by McDonough and Shaw (1993), and described as "a tendency to focus on features of sound at the expense of 'co-text' – the surrounding linguistic environment" (p. 125).

The information in Table 1 was collected over the course of a full semester in various teaching situations and shows that my students do indeed focus on sounds. Some of these errors appear to be what Pinker (ibid.) refers to as "oronyms" or "strings of sound that can be carved into words in two different ways" (p.160). For example, errors such as number four: "people like my wife" for "people in my life", could feasibly be made by a native speaker.

This is an important observation because when errors like this occur, and *unless they show connections with a pre-listening activity*, they are demonstrably the result of students trying and failing to process the sounds they hear. Also in example four we can see the word "most" mistaken for "ghost", and it might be argued that this type of error need never occur, if students were given effective pre-listening exercises to channel their expectations. But, in my experience, these errors are worth making, and well-worth highlighting in a cooperative classroom environment – outside of testing; I wholeheartedly agree with Field (1998) that "From a process perspective, wrong answers can be seen to be of more significance than correct ones" (p. 111). In the above examples, they confirm that listening, and no other skill, is the focus of the class's time and energy. However, that is not all that they do. This type of error has a greater significance in enhancing student engagement with the text because, when they are compared with the actual

Table 1. Types of listening error

	<i>Students heard:</i>	<i>Actual text: [...] shows similar sound.</i>
1	Have you last year	[Harvard University]
2	Demons beautiful world	She's [The most beautiful] woman in the [world]
3	taught me	I can [tal]k to them
4	The ghost improves people like my wife	[The most important people in my life]
5	Judges are pretty	[It's Chef Jackson Dupree]
6	By my stink	A[bout most things]

text, students realize explicitly that they struggle to hear words that they *already know*. The students I work with seem to find overcoming this difficulty a very attractive – and no doubt surmountable – challenge, and it is this, I believe, that enhances their engagement with texts. This is the theme to which I return to in the third section of this paper.

2. Preparation of Students

2.1 Preparation for what?

Due to my own reading about speech perception in Crystal and Pinker referred to above, I have always regarded the top-down processing described by Nunan (2002) as a subconscious activity conducted at the speed of speech. For this reason, I have never been confident in approaching listening from the standpoint of describing or employing strategies. Field (1998) clearly had doubts about teaching them, and it is with relief that I note Renandya and Farrell (2010) reported insufficient evidence of strategy training's effectiveness "to endorse its implementation in EFL language classrooms" (p. 55). Therefore, I do not prepare students to engage strategically with texts, but rather prepare them for what Renandya and Farrell (*ibid.*) call extensive listening or activities where students "receive a lot of comprehensible and enjoyable listening input" (p. 56). In effect, that leaves me with little preparation to do, but what there is I describe here.

2.2 Avoiding Isolation

I find that grouping students is the most useful thing I can do at the start of preparations for a listening activity. It has no effect on students' expectations of texts, and is essential to building what I have referred to as 'participation confidence'. As Field (2002) states, "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" (p. 247). My experience strongly supports this, and I find that placing

students in groups and encouraging a noisy environment, prior to introducing the text, is far easier than trying to urge on a class once they have fallen into something resembling self-imposed test conditions. The only caveat to this would be in test preparation classes, where students must have some experience of approaching listening exercises alone.

I do not let students get into groups by themselves, but try to number-off students into teams representative of, what I feel to be, the class ability range. This prevents the formation of groups with widely varying levels of commitment or ability, and – in a positive sense – disturbs the existing structure of the class. If the greatest thing unifying the attention of the new groups is the task itself then so much the better.

2.3 Pre-listening

The precise form of pre-listening activities, or at least instructions, is very important because, unlike the decision to group students, it cannot be done by any type of routine, but will rather depend upon the actual text and its delivery. As I have said in 2.1 above I prefer instructions to be kept to the minimum. So, if I am using a dictation that I wrote myself, I will simply instruct students to write down exactly what they hear. If I am playing published audio text however, I will ask myself what can reasonably be expected of the students, and if there are pictures in a textbook or a film clip that accompanies the sound, I will *consider* showing such images beforehand. For example, if there are multiple speakers then I will make sure the students are aware of this. Concealing that information would not have the effect of improving anybody's focus on listening; it would merely blind them to details that would be obvious to participants in a practical situation. Similarly, I would likely explain where the speakers are, if their conversation appears inexplicable out of context.

The key to proceeding therefore, is to nurture the listening focus I describe in section

one. Giving students too much information will obviate it, just as too little information will confound it. So, I will avoid any new vocabulary in a dictation because expecting students to perceive the unknowable creates a pointless obstacle. However, if an otherwise useful soundtrack has new vocabulary I will give it to the students before or during the exercise. Finally, I will try to ensure that any pre-listening is done in as short a time as possible, and certainly not longer than five minutes.

3. Task manipulation for enhanced engagement

3.1 Example dictation exercise

Dictation exercises of my own creation offer me the greatest control of material in listening exercises, and, importantly here, the greatest flexibility regarding change of pace. Also, because students are busy discussing what they hear in their groups, I have ample time to make my own notes on the way the exercising is progressing or how students are reacting. This means I can write future dictations from a more informed position. One ninety-word, seven sentence dictation that I prepared and used during the time that this paper was being written is produced in full as Text 1. below. It was, of course, read to students organized into groups as described in 2.2 above.

Text 1. Dictation text

1. Wow, what a summer vacation I had. 2. My wife and I had two great trips to Hokkaido and Niigata. 3. The most exciting trip was the one to Hokkaido because we hiked up a mountain with many bears. 4. I wanted to see a bear at a distance, but I didn't want to get too close. 5. To avoid surprising a bear, we both wore bells on our clothes. 6. Also, I carried a special bear spray in case we had an incident. 7. Fortunately, or unfortunately we didn't see any bears in the end. (*Ninety words in seven sentences*)

This text has a certain amount of authenticity for two reasons: it was entirely true, and was read by the same person who had written it in the first person. I read the text while facing away from the class, which, I personally have found, helps me to speak less like a teacher and more like somebody speaking English to another native speaker. The text was used at the start of the autumn semester in a class where the students had already been speaking about their own vacations. These factors combined to give an exercise that was largely unpredictable, but in no way inexplicable. This is the type of exercise for which I try to prepare my students.

3.2 Arrangement of tasks

This exercise could be conducted by a teacher reading through the text sentence by sentence with a pause perhaps half-way through to check comprehension. As a slight variation, an examination of what groups came up with, and what they should have heard, could be conducted as post-listening. Either one of these approaches will, in my experience, produce a task that is unresponsive to the curiosity of the class. Equally importantly, it will risk leaving students with a growing compilation of unidentified errors. While errors are welcome, it is knowing about them and 'fixing' them which fascinates students in a listening exercise. Quite simply, if I review regularly and conduct short micro-listening tasks based on actual student difficulty, I will be constantly gauging the students' level of engagement with small pieces of text. In other words, I am in a controlling position to manipulate the exercise.

3.2.1 Types of manipulation

The three types of manipulation that I would consider staples are:

1. giving alternately natural, or 'strengthened' pronunciation of weak vowel sounds (which students usually, and incorrectly, regard as varying speed)
2. asking students to count the words in a sentence rather than concern themselves

with its semantic value

3. increasing the speed at which I speak

I attach paramount importance to each of these 'tweaks' because of firstly the major role they have in increasing the difficulty of perceiving speech, and secondly the effect they have on students: the enhanced level of engagement I mentioned briefly at the end of section 1.3.

3.2.2 Weak vowel sounds

The fifth sentence of Text 1 provides us with a good example of the effect unstressed vowels can have on what students hear. The sentence begins "To avoid surprising a bear..." The first group in the class to volunteer what they heard reported hearing "Two boys were surprising a bear." This guess, though incorrect, does not violate any previous grammatical or semantic context. It is merely a failure to correctly identify a new subject, but it is very much a wrong turning if left uncorrected. Another group guessed correctly when the vowel sound was stressed, but the exercise of counting the words in the sentence (though again with increased stress on the first vowel in "avoid") might equally likely have corrected the error. In any case, overcoming difficulties like these throughout the text resulted in thirty-eight minutes of very intensive listening practice with lively discussion, laughter, mock-defeatism and renewed enthusiasm.

A particularly interesting observation is that the "Two boys" error spread rapidly throughout the class. I take this as a warning against teaching compensatory strategies because intelligent guesswork would have led to a disappointing error. Another error in sentence three where "hiked up a mountain" was heard by one group as "couple of mountains" violated grammatical context – substituting a nominal group for a required verb phrase. That error met resistance from the rest of the class and wasn't adopted. Learning about my students' listening process in this way was interesting for me as a

teacher, and the nature of the process itself appeared highly motivating for a class that might, just as easily, have struggled quietly from start to finish.

3.2.3 Sentence word counts

Sentence word counts are a useful way to repeat misunderstood material while avoiding repetition of the same unsuccessful attempts at listening. Again, the example is from the fifth sentence in Text 1. Here students heard "bells for clothes" instead of "bells on our clothes". While the students could not count the words in the sentence without assistance, they got the correct version after being told that "bells" was word nine and "clothes" was word twelve. This is typically a useful micro-exercise because, as in this example, nouns are often picked out by students relatively easily, and so giving their place number to students does nothing to 'give the game away', but does reward a partial success while redirecting the focus of the students' attention on speech yet to be decoded. Sentence word counting is, in my opinion, also a good task to set students who find any piece of a text intractable or awkward. I can always help with the task, and if the students are strongly engaged with the exercise I find it justifies using occasionally difficult texts.

3.2.4 Increasing speed

Increasing the speed of an already difficult exercise would, initially, seem to be rather mean-spirited. I would merely record here that in exercises where a stretch of text is judged to be well within student capability, then a rapid or even artificially-fast initial reading by a teacher to an engaged class can be very noisily, but good-naturedly rebuffed by the students. Subsequent readings at a more reasonable – but still quick – pace can cause students to surprise themselves with the speeds that they can deal with.

4. Observations

As stated in the introduction, this paper describes a small-scale study which has allowed me to examine my own approach towards teaching listening and the effect that this has on my students. I have asked whether certain types of task-manipulation can enhance the level of student engagement with rapid or authentic speech – which can often be excessively demanding for many university students. Based on the example exercises described above, I feel that they can.

I have also described how I attempt to focus on the skill of listening and how I prepare students for the tasks. This includes preventing students from becoming isolated and ensuring that they are not overburdened by my demands on how they should respond during exercises. Since ELT researchers who write about teaching listening consistently address the same topics, I have found it useful to consider these themes in relation to my own classroom practice.

This paper makes no attempt to generalize from my own experience to broader contexts. However, it considers and demonstrates how my own reading both within and extending beyond ELT is put to practical use in the classroom. Should this be of interest to other teaching professionals in similar situations, and were they to benefit from this discussion in any way, then I would consider this paper worthwhile.

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