

LISTENING WITH COMPREHENSION: A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

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Introduction

The process of communication is bi-modal. It involves the ability to receive a message as well as the ability to produce one. In teaching second languages, great pains are taken to develop the student's capacity to speak. Too often however, listening with comprehension is allowed to develop haphazardly. As a result, the student is able to make himself understood orally, but is unable to comprehend what is being said when in a situation where he needs to communicate in the target language. The purpose of this paper is threefold: 1) to review the psychological constructs which comprise listening comprehension in order to gain better knowledge of what processes are involved in understanding the spoken word; 2) to view in perspective the importance of attention to the listening skill in a curriculum designed to teach a foreign language; and 3) to suggest some strategies to engender in the learner the ability to listen with comprehension.

The Psychology and Physiology of Listening

During a language event, a message passes through seven stages from the time it originates in the mind of the speaker to the moment it is comprehended by the listener, as can be seen in Figure 1 (Brooks, 1964, pp. 3-4). Comprehension evolves in a linear fashion. First, the speaker conceptualizes an image or an idea which motivates him to communicate (1). He then encodes the idea into a language that is common to both speaker and listener in terms of complexity and style (2). Having formulated the message according to the corresponding syntax, lexicon, and sound-symbol system, he articulates it verbally (3). The message remains in a state of ambience (4) until it strikes the auditory apparatus (5) of the listener who then must decode it (6) according to the meaning

of the message as interpreted through various filters—age, sex, cultural milieu, suprasegmental features—found in his deep structure. Finally, the listener needs to relate the message to the sum of his experiential background in the information stored in his memory (7). The message is said to have been comprehended and assimilated within the listener's cognitive structure when the progression from stages 1 through 7 is completed, thereby confirming or corroborating his concept of the world or reshaping its parameters. The listener demonstrates reception of the audio stimuli by reacting or responding in a manner which indicates to the speaker (or observer) that the message has been heard and (mis)understood (Asher, 1974, 1977).

Comprehension occurs in the short-term memory where information is stored for a period of only a few seconds which meaningful portions of the message are subsumed for long-term retention (Stevick, 1976). Conversely, bits of information that are not meaningful to the listener are forgotten immediately and selectively (Ausubel, 1963). According to Ausubel, the subsumptive process is an automatic one and includes selective forgetting and retention. The listener has been trained from a very young age to sort out what he hears, sees, or reads and to relate it meaningfully to his previously conceived perception of the world or to seek clarification of apparent contradictions or anomalies. The cognitive structure which results is the scaffolding about which one interprets ideas, concepts and principles. Listening with comprehension, thus, is a fundamental way in which the individual confirms or modifies his relation to his environment.

Native Language Acquisition

The ability to process information meaningfully through the ear is cultivated throughout the pre-school and school years (Cook, 1971). As a child learns to understand his native tongue, he experiments with the sound he hears by babbling. The first sounds he is able to distinguish are traditionally contrastive ones as in "ma-ma", "da-da". With increasing exposure to language, he is able to understand more complex vowel-consonant combinations and voice patterns. Through time, the child becomes adept at comprehending and reacting to an intelligible sequence of sounds of sentence length; he is able to relate one sound with another in the comprehension of words which in themselves carry meaning. With practice, the child can perceive relationships between words and can comprehend complex sentences and ideas.

In the beginning stages of schooling, little emphasis is placed on requiring the recall of everything the child hears. Repetition insures understanding which providing a basis for the formation of categories of cognition. Through repetition, the child develops the ability to subsume information as he receives it even though perception is developed

through exposure to the same or similar information rather than through strict attention to concept learning and principles. Some children develop the ability to subsume aural stimuli more rapidly than others and are able to acquire information at a faster rate. As the child proceeds through the grades, he experiences a decreasing amount of repetitive practice and an increasing amount and complexity of information he processes meaningfully through the ear. Eventually, the student will have advanced to the point where he can subsume new information quickly, and can relate it to his previously existing knowledge. The latter level of auditory comprehension requires a higher degree of cognitive operation as enumerated by Bloom (1965) and Gagne (1965).

Second Language Acquisition

The complexity of listening with comprehension in a second language becomes evident upon review of the stages (recognition, interrelation, subsumption, recall, and problem-solving) through which a child passes as he learns his native tongue. Learning a foreign language is a time-consuming endeavor helped only incidentally by the learner's immediate environment. When a student begins the study of a foreign language, particularly in a school setting, he starts from scratch. The task is not as lengthy as learning one's first language because the student is more physiologically and cognitively mature. Nevertheless, the second language learner must still undergo the same process of listening comprehensive in the target language as does the child learning his native tongue. Speech is first heard as a stream of sounds with little apparent structure or meaning. Gradually, the student is able to recognize the phonic and syntactic patterning which is distinctive for each language as he builds up a framework of expectations and is able to recognize redundancies inherent in all spoken speech. Midway to understanding, the student is able to recognize familiar and crucial elements but cannot differentiate the interrelationships within the whole stream of sounds, nor remember the essentials of the message. Primary information becomes clear with practice and rehearsal as the listener becomes adept at identifying those segments of speech which relate to kernel ideas. It is at this point that listening with comprehension can be said to be achieved (Rivers, 1968).

Techniques to develop listening comprehension in a foreign language can be adapted to conform to the natural ability to comprehend the spoken listening word with which the student understands his native tongue. Nearly all of the methods of foreign language instruction include the audio component as an objective. Similarly, almost all make use of ample amounts of pattern or structural drills (Kelly, 1969). The audio-lingual approach attempts to follow the natural order (listening, speaking, reading, writing) to help the learner comprehend a message (Brooks, 1964).

Repetition, substitution, and transformation drills are structured hierarchically to lead the student to a level of automatic comprehension (Stack, 1971). However, Paulston (1970) cautions that repetition-substitution drills focus too much on sound and word recognition without aiding the learner to recognize the broader framework of the stream of speech which carries the full meaning. The student is often able to determine contrasts among a series of sounds or words but is unable to interrelate the words in an utterance in a meaningful manner.

Similar inattention to the broader aspects of listening with comprehension can be found in other strategies of second language instruction. The Gouin method (Diller, 1971) begins with the use of sentence-length utterances for exercises in recognition of sounds. Students are trained to listen to and react to the complete utterance and to derive meaning based upon previous practice. If the same utterance occurs in a different sequence or with different inflections, the student may not recognize them because he has not been trained to perceive sounds as smaller units which convey meaning in many recombinations. The direct method as exemplified by the Berlitz materials eliminates contrastive exercises at the syllabic or word level. Lessons begin at the phrase level, avoiding the recognition of individual sounds. The student may encounter difficulty in recognizing words that were not practiced beforehand for the new combinations of sounds found in new words may not be meaningful because they have not been practiced.

Paulston and Selekman (1976) recommend that drills aimed at achieving communication in a foreign language should progress in an order according to three categories: 1) mechanical, 2) meaningful, and 3) communicative. The classification has a direct relationship to teaching listening with comprehension. Mechanical drills are designed to develop the student's ability to distinguish between sounds and groups of sounds or words. Meaningful drills are useful in developing the ability to draw relationships from among words and to understand a message. Once the student masters drills of the first two categories, he will be able to respond to the message uttered in a communicative drill. He will have developed the ability to subsume meaningful material (sounds and words), to retrieve information from long-term memory, and to relate it to the incoming stimuli. When the student is able to understand sounds and words, and to recall them, he is on his way to reaching the problem-solving stage; he is able to grasp the meaning of an utterance and to respond to it in an equally meaningful fashion.

Drills to Develop Listening with Comprehension

In preparing for an exercise in listening comprehension, care must be taken to consider 1) the level of difficulty of the drill (whether mechanical, meaningful, or communicative); 2) the level of performance expected of the students as prescribed by the objectives of the exercise; 3) the manner in which the student will demonstrate comprehension (e.g., reply, encircle, act out); and, 4) the means in which the learner's performance is to be evaluated. The strategies described below differ from those suggested by proponents of the listening before speaking approach (Asher, 1974; Postovsky, 1974) in that they can be made to conform to any textbook or method and require little specialized training.

Mechanical Drills

Following are some examples of drills that may be used in the development of the listening ability at the mechanical level. All examples are given for Spanish. The materials reflect exercises and techniques currently in use in the Beginning course for Spanish at Purdue University.

In the following exercises, students are taught to recognize the vowel-consonant combinations as they are read aloud (either by the teacher or an audiotape) by underlining or encircling, as they are enumerated, one or more words included in a group of similar items. The student has before him the script of all of the items as they will be uttered so that his response will be one of recognition and not of recall. The exercises given in 1.0 focus on large and easily perceived differences between vowel/consonant combinations. The difficulty of the exercise is increased until the learner is forced to discriminate progressively minimal contrasts at the syllable or word, and phrase level (2.0-2.2). Finally, the student is asked to parrot or read aloud his responses which are corrected or corroborated by the teacher or tape.

- 1.0 fama fecha fosa fina fumo
masa mesa mona mina mucho
- 2.0 fe, fa nulo, fulo
sal, sol mesa, masa
- 2.1 leche, lecho fuman, fumen
lili, mili loamos, loemos
eso, seso muchacho, muchacha
- 2.2 Abro la maleta Busque cartas
Abrió la maleta Busque cartas
He hablado con su amigo
Ha hablado con su amigo
- 2.3 Write the words and phrases as you hear them.

Increasingly complex sound and word combinations are used to refine the listening skill as the student's listening acuity progresses. A dictation exercise at the word level or phrase level (23.) is the final step in the evaluation of the listening skill. Initially, dictation may be confined to words and phrases, later passing to sentences and paragraphs where the learner must integrate a wide knowledge of sound, structure, and meaning to provide a faithful rendition of materials he receives through the ear. In all cases, the arrangement of dictation exercises must be easily recognizable in order not to overload the student's ability to understand the meaning of the message.

Meaningful Drills

On a more advanced level, practice in the recognition of sounds and phrases can be afforded through true-false and either/or questions which require that the student recognize words and infer the basic meaning in the utterance (Meiden and Murphy, 1968). Using the context from 3.0 (the content of which is read by the teacher or a tape as the student views the script), the true-false questions in 3.1 follow the same syntactic structure and sequence as the text and allow for listening practice in recognition.

3.0 Juan es un muchacho de diecisiete años. Asiste al colegio de su pueblo. Tiene muchos amigos y amigas. Le gusta jugar al fútbol todos los días. Juega muy bien.

3.1 Juan es un muchacho de diecisiete años. ¿Cierto o falso?
Asiste al colegio de su pueblo. ¿si o no?
Tiene muchos amigos. ¿Verdad?
¿Le gusta jugar al fútbol, o no?

Master of the recognition of units of sounds within an utterance, in both declarative and interrogative form, allows the student to begin relating words in a meaningful context with others on a higher level of difficulty. Again based on the context of 3.0, the either/or questions in the example 3.2, require that the student subsume only limited amounts of information but he must contrast the sounds in a meaningful context while comparing their denotations in order to reach a conclusion about what he knows (or thinks) to be true, based upon what he has heard (or read).

3.2 ¿Tiene el muchacho 16 o 17 años?
¿Va al colegio de su pueblo o de otro pueblo?
¿Tiene muchos o pocos amigos?
¿Le gusta jugar al fútbol o al beisbol?
¿Juega bien o mal?

The either/or questions follow the same serial order as the original text. Only a question transformation has been added with clear but limited options. With minimal distracting information, comprehension of the original context is evaluated in a rapid and facile manner.

Communicative Drills

Exercises of the communicative variety are needed as a final step in the development and evaluation of true comprehension and problem-solving, a process which requires that the student store the information in his long-term memory. With a reservoir of knowledge, the student is able to recall information at the proper time and to make the necessary inter-word and inter-sentential relationships to understand a complex message. Communicative exercises presuppose that the student be familiar with all requisite lexical and structural elements and be free to subsume the necessary semantic information to complete the problem-solving task in comprehension. The student has arrived at listening comprehension once he has reached the problem-solving stage and can subsume and retrieve information pertinent to the parts of the message at will and relate the information context to his own world. He can demonstrate an understanding of special and temporal relationships, cause and effect, and mood; he can relate the actor, the action, and the object acted upon; he can reflect all circumstantial relationships. These complex arrangements can be practiced and evaluated through questions based upon a series of partial interrogatives in which the interrogator causes the student to "factor" a sentence through response to partial interrogatives (Molina, 1968) as in 3.3, below.

- 3.3 ?Cómo se llama el joven?
?Cuántos años tiene?
?Dónde estudia?
?Cuántos amigos tiene?
?Qué le gusta jugar? ?Cuándo?
?Cómo juega?

?Cómo se llama el mejor amigo de Vd.?
?Cuántos años tiene?
?Estudia o no?
?Le gusta jugar al tenis?
etc.

Conclusion

Teachers of foreign languages must take the time to assess the method of instruction and the corresponding exercises to develop listening with comprehension. Vital questions to address are, Does the method develop

the listening skill in a natural way? Is too much expected of the students considering their current stage of language acquisition? Do students find they can get their message across but cannot understand a reply? Care must be taken in planning the development of listening comprehension so that students do not learn haphazardly. The use of the mechanical, meaningful and communicative drills in a systematic manner will aid in the development of listening with comprehension. True/false, either/or, and information questions presented via media or *alta voce* provide a useful vehicle to lead the student along the path from intuitive to complete understanding of the spoken word.

Endnotes

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