

Proficiency in L2



Acquiring Listening Skills

- Over 50 percent of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language is devoted to listening (Nunan, 1998).
- Despite this, we often take the importance of listening for granted, and it is arguably the least understood and most overlooked of the four skills (L, S, R and W) in the language classroom.

- Listening is the natural precursor to speaking; the early stages of language development in a person's first language (and in naturalistic acquisition of other languages) are dependent on listening.

- What does listening include?
- What is the difference between 'hearing' and 'listening'?

English that you listen to has to be processed in real time. There is no time to pause or think. You cannot 're-process' listening material, as you can with a written text that you are reading. So, if you miss important information as the dialogue or discourse proceeds, there is the danger, if not likelihood, that you may 'lose the thread' of what the dialogue or discourse is about.

Listening

- Segmentation
- Processing
 - Knowledge of language (morphology, syntax, vocabulary, semantics)
 - Contextual knowledge (physical setting, participants, what has been said, what will be said)
 - Background knowledge (world, socio-cultural, discourse)

Spoken language, particularly informal speech, has some unique features

- Incomplete utterances – Dinner? (“Is dinner ready?”)
- Repetitions – I’m absolutely sure, absolutely sure you know that she’s right
- Hesitations – yes, well, ummm, yes, possibly, but, er...

There are also other factors such as background noise, tone of the voice etc.

Segmentation

- Listening to continuous flow of speech and drawing up word boundaries

Ice cream vs. I scream

- You can make meaning-based division
- In writing, spaces between words
- That's why lower levels – slow clearly articulated speech

- Syllable timed – Stress timed
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXHxtpvRacc>

- Reduced Forms (Contractions, Weak Forms and Chunks)
- I've lived in Wellington for 10 years.
- Fifty-one high frequency function words in English contain weak forms.
- E.g., been → bn, his → z, and → ənd, nd, n (Field, 2003: 334).
- Chunks—How are you going?

- Assimilation and Elision
- "I ain't no ham samwich"
- "Many adults, especially in casual speech, and most children assimilate the place of articulation of the nasal to the following labial consonant in the word sandwich:
- sandwich /sænwič/ → /sæmwič/
- The alveolar nasal /n/ assimilates to the bilabial /w/ by changing the alveolar to a bilabial /m/. (The /d/ of the spelling is not present for most speakers, though it can occur in careful pronunciation.)"

(Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck, Linguistics for Everyone. Wadsworth, 2010)

- 'handbag' might be produced in full as /hændbæg/. However, the /d/ is in a site where elision is possible, so the phrase could be produced as /hænbæg/.

- Resyllabification
- E.g., went in → wen tin
- made out → may dout
- (can't) help it → hel pit

- What about non-native varieties of English?
Are they easier to understand?
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9arM_agKFA
- L1 (mother tongue) influence
- sweaty snakes or Swati snacks?

Processing

- How the mind works out the grammatical structure and meaning of the sentence it hears
- Bottom-up and top-down processing

- Bottom-up: building up the sentence in our mind bit by bit
- Sounds – words – phrases – sentence

The man ate breakfast

- Step 1: the + man = the man (noun phrase)
(article + noun = noun phrase)

Step 2: ate + breakfast = ate breakfast
(verb + noun = verb phrase)

Step 3: (the man) + (ate breakfast)

Noun phrase + Verb phrase = sentence

- Top-down parsing: Start at the discourse /whole sentence level and break it up into smaller and smaller bits

Step 1: The man ate breakfast – full sentence

Step 2: (the man) + (ate breakfast)

Sentence = Noun phrase + Verb phrase

Step 3: The man = the + man

Step 4: ate breakfast = ate + breakfast

- Effective listeners use both strategies
- Usually, top-down processing for intonation patterns and phrases
- Bottom-up strategies for words

Access to words

- In order to comprehend a sentence, you need to know what words mean
- 'blint' - If somebody asks a native speaker if it is an English word, the reaction time is too short
- Efficient storage and retrieval

- Context makes only particular meanings available to us
- What could 'Table' mean -
 - In a research article?
 - While decorating a house?
 - In a legislative assembly?

- The dog was hit by a bus.

‘the’ – definite article – what does it mean?

Hit – irregular verb – what tense is it in?

Passive voice – why and what does it mean?

Contextual Knowledge

“I need you to do it for me”

- Teacher and student
- Boss and an employee
- Husband and wife
- Two close friends

A: "John, are you not getting late for school?"

B: "I won't go to school today"

A: "Why?"

B: "My stomach's upset"

A: "Come on, don't make such a silly excuse"

Listening sub-skills

- Listening for gist
- Listening for specific information
- Listening for details

- You're at the airport, listening for information about your flight.
- You're in a city that you don't know. You've asked someone for directions to your hotel.
- You're listening to a song on the radio.
- You're chatting with an old friend and exchanging news.
- You're paying for your shopping at the supermarket

- Communication strategies—strategies to assist comprehension, for example making predictions before listening, listening selectively, knowing how to interrupt politely, etc.

- Learning strategies—strategies for noticing language forms in the input in their independent listening, for example negotiating (seeking clarification), listening for patterns, focused listening.