

TEACHING LISTENING

Questions for Reflection

- Why is the *integration* of two or more skills important in language pedagogy?
- What are the key issues and concepts in pedagogical research that are related to teaching listening comprehension?
- What makes listening difficult for students?
- How can language be classified into *types* of spoken language? And into micro- and macroskills? And what do learners “do” to perform listening?
- How can one design effective, principled techniques for teaching listening? How does one apply those principles to observing—and learning from—others’ teaching?
- What are the basic principles and methods for assessing listening comprehension?

Three people are on a train in England. As they approach what appears to be Wembley Station, one of the travelers says, “Is this Wembley?” “No,” replies a second passenger, “it’s Thursday.” Whereupon the third person remarks, “Oh, I am too; let’s have a drink!”

This little joke is an illustration of the importance of listening—or in this case *bearing!* Through reception, we internalize linguistic information without which we could not produce language. In classrooms, students always do more listening than speaking. Listening competence is universally “larger” than speaking competence. Is it any wonder, then, that in recent years the language-teaching profession has placed a concerted emphasis on listening comprehension?

Listening comprehension has not always drawn the attention of educators to the extent that it now has. Perhaps human beings have a natural tendency to look at speaking as the major index of language proficiency. Consider, for example, our commonly used query, “Do you speak Japanese?” Of course we don’t mean to exclude comprehension when we say that, but when we think of L2 learning, we tend first to think of speaking. In the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, language teaching methodology was preoccupied with the spoken language, and classrooms full of students could be heard performing their oral drills. It was not uncommon for students to practice phrases orally they didn’t even understand!

Recent decades have seen a welcome change in emphasis on the oral. We now understand that words and sentences carefully and slowly pronounced for

classroom learners is *not* the real world. The latter, which students in classrooms must be ready to face, is “being able to identify words in the *acoustic blur* or normal conversational speech” (G. Brown, 2010, p. 157). This continues to be our current challenge, magnified by our awareness of the importance of context, culture, discourse, community, and other sociolinguistic variables.

INTEGRATING THE FOUR SKILLS

Before launching into a treatment of teaching listening, let’s first make it crystal clear that the four skills are rarely if ever encountered as discrete skills, inseparable from the others. Listening frequently implies speaking, and in academic contexts possibly note-taking; speaking virtually always implies a listener; writing and reading are share obvious links; and the interconnections go on.

In L2 classrooms, we’ll often find the following instances of integration:

- a *pre-reading discussion* of a topic to activate schemata, followed by either a *reading* or a *writing* task
- *listening* to a *spoken* lecture or monologue, accompanied by *note-taking* and followed by a *discussion*
- *writing* a response to a *reading* passage



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

What other instances of the integration of at least two skills can you think of? How might that integration lead to reinforcing both (or all) the skills in question? Are there any disadvantages to such integration?

Does the integration of the four skills diminish the importance of the fundamentals of listening, speaking, reading, and writing? Not at all. If anything, the added richness of integration gives students greater motivation that converts to better retention of principles of effective speaking, listening, reading, and writing. And such integration can still utilize a strong, principled approach to the separate, unique characteristics of each skill.

You may be wondering why courses weren’t always integrated in the first place. There are several reasons. In the pre-CLT era, the focus on the *forms* of language almost predisposed curriculum designers to segment courses into the separate language skills. Further, administrative considerations made it easier to program separate skills courses. And finally, certain languages for specific purposes (LSP) courses may still best be labeled by one of the four skills, especially at the high intermediate to advanced levels.

The integration of at least two or more skills is now the typical approach within a communicative, interactive framework. As Hinkel (2006, p. 113) noted, “In an age of globalization, pragmatic objectives of language learning place an increased value on *integrated and dynamic multiskill* instructional models with a focus on meaningful communication and the development of learners’ communicative competence.” The following observations support such models.

Advantages of Integrating Two or More Skills

1. Production and reception are two sides of the same coin.
2. Interaction involves sending *and* receiving messages.
3. By attending primarily to what learners can *do* with language, we invite any or all of the four skills that are relevant into the classroom arena.
4. One skill will often reinforce another.
5. Most of our natural language performance entails connections between language and the way we think and feel and act.

LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH

Now, bearing in mind the importance of the integration of skills, for the sake of simplicity we’ll look at the four skills separately in the next four chapters. We return to our focus on listening.

A Historical Sketch

Listening as a major component in language learning and teaching first hit the spotlight in the late 1970s with James Asher’s (1977) work on Total Physical Response (see Chapter 2). In TPR the role of comprehension was given prominence as learners were given great quantities of language to listen to before they were encouraged to respond orally. Similarly, the Natural Approach (again see Chapter 2) recommended a significant “silent period” during which learners were allowed the security of listening without being forced to go through the anxiety of speaking before they were “ready” to do so.

Such approaches were an outgrowth of a variety of research studies that showed evidence of the importance of input in second language acquisition (see *PLLT*, Chapters 9 & 10). Krashen (1985), for example, stressed the significance of comprehensible input, or the aural reception of language that is just a little beyond the learner’s present ability.

About the same time, researchers were also discovering the significance of what learners actually *did* with input, perhaps through *noticing* certain features of language, but ultimately internalizing those elements in their long-term competence (Gor & Long, 2009; Goh, 2014). You can be “exposed” to great quantities

of language, but what counts is the linguistic information that you ultimately glean from that exposure through conscious and subconscious attention, through cognitive strategies of retention, through feedback, and through interaction.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

In your own learning of an L2, think of examples of your receiving input from your teacher (or from video or audio media) that you were not able to convert into your long-term competence. For example, let's say you experienced an activity on the past tense, then a few minutes later made mistakes on what you had just practiced. What were the reasons for your not being able to convert auditory input into long-term competence? How can you help your students to better *notice* and retain such information?

Meanwhile, pedagogical research on listening comprehension made significant refinements in the process of listening. Studies looked at the effect of a number of different contextual characteristics and how they affect the speed and efficiency of processing aural language. Rubin (1994) identified five such factors: text, interlocutor, task, listener, and process characteristics. In each case, important elements of the listening process were identified. For example, the listener characteristics of proficiency, memory, attention, affect, age, gender, background schemata, and even learning disabilities in the L1 all affect the process of listening (pp. 206–10).

In other research, attention was given to types of meaning involved in the act of comprehending language (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). In this perspective, phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic knowledge are considered, along with nonverbal elements involved in most real-world (face-to-face) listening. Other studies have looked at the extent to which *first* language listening ability contributes to one's performance of second language listening, with the interesting suggestion by Vandergrift (2013) that if you're a good listener in your L1, you stand a good chance of doing well in L2 listening tasks.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

What are the attributes of a “good” listener? Think about a range of elements—from phonological, to pragmatic, to contextual. In light of those factors, do you think good listeners in their L1 tend to also be successful listeners in an L2? If the presumed correspondence is not always true, what elements, if any, of listening in one's L1 might *not* carry over to the L2?

Research has also examined the role of strategic factors and of strategies-based instruction in listening comprehension (Mendelsohn, 1998; Vandergrift, 2003, 2004, 2013; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Rost, 2005; Hinkel, 2006). Studies tend to agree that listening, especially for academic and professional contexts, is a highly refined skill that requires a learner's attention to a battery of strategies for extracting meaning from texts (Flowerdew, 1994).

Myths and Pedagogical Objectives

All this research has helped to expose some important myths about listening, misconceptions that "have sprung up and influenced the way listening is taught" (Richards & Burns, 2012, p. ix). Let's briefly look at these misconceptions at the outset (adapted from Richards & Burns, 2012, and S. Brown, 2011):



MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHING LISTENING

- Listening is a "passive" skill.
- Listening is a "one-way" process.
- Listening is an individual process.
- Listening skills are acquired subconsciously—students just "absorb" them.
- Listening equals comprehension.
- Listening and speaking should be taught separately.

As you read on in this chapter, you will discover why all these statements (which have at one time or another been claimed to be true) are indeed myths. We will look at how students can be active learners, combine listening performance with other skills, collaborate with other students in listening comprehension tasks, and ultimately improve their overall competence in the L2 through listening.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

In each of the six myths above, why do you suppose they are believed by some to be true? In arguing against their authenticity, what principles or guidelines emerge in each case? For example, in the first myth, how can you make listening an *active* skill in the classroom?

Here are some specific objectives we will address in this chapter on teaching listening comprehension:

Pedagogical Questions about Teaching Listening

- What are listeners “doing” when they listen?
- What factors affect good listening?
- What are the characteristics of “real-life” listening?
- What are the many things listeners listen for?
- What are some principles for designing listening techniques?
- How can listening techniques be interactive?
- What are some common techniques for teaching listening?

AN INTERACTIVE MODEL OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Listening is not a “one-way street.” It is not merely the process of a unidirectional receiving of audible symbols. One facet—the first step—of listening comprehension is the psychomotor process of receiving sound waves through the ear and transmitting nerve impulses to the brain. But that’s just the beginning of what is clearly an interactive process as the brain acts on the impulses, bringing to bear a number of different cognitive and affective mechanisms.

The following seven processes—adapted from Clark and Clark (1977) and Richards (1983)—are all involved in comprehension. With the exception of the initial and final processes below, no sequence is implied here; they all occur if not simultaneously, then in extremely rapid succession. Neurological time must be viewed in terms of microseconds.

Listening Comprehension Processes

1. Decoding auditory sounds
2. Determining the function of the speech event
3. Activating schemata
4. Assigning literal meanings
5. Assigning intended meaning
6. Determining the demand for short- or long-term memory
7. Retaining essential information or meanings

Let’s look at these seven processes in detail.

1. The hearer processes what we’ll call “raw speech” and holds an “image” of it in short-term memory. This image consists of the constituents (phrases, clauses, cohesive markers, intonation, and stress patterns) of a stream of speech.

2. The hearer determines the type of speech event being processed (for example, a conversation, a speech, a radio broadcast) and then appropriately “colors” the interpretation of the perceived message. By attending to context and the content, for example, one determines whether the speaker wishes to persuade, request, exchange pleasantries, affirm, deny, inform, and so forth. Thus the *function* of the message is inferred.
3. The hearer recalls background information (or **schemata**; see Chapter 18 for more on this topic) relevant to the particular context and subject matter. A lifetime of experiences and knowledge is used to perform cognitive associations in order to bring a plausible interpretation to the message.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Imagine you are about to present a short five-minute video to your intermediate level class on the topic of the top five recommended sights to see in your city. What might you do for about five or ten minutes to prepare the students for the video—to *pre-teach* the listening process? Use these first three processes to guide your thoughts.

4. The hearer assigns a *literal* meaning to the utterance, a process that involves semantic interpretation. In many instances, literal and intended (see item 5) meanings match. So, for example, suppose one of your students walks into your office while you are very busy with something and says she has a question for you, then says, “Do you have the time?” You might answer “yes” to the presumed literal meaning of the question. But then let’s say a stranger sitting beside you on a bus looks at you and says, “Do you have the time?” Your appropriate response is not “yes” or “no” but rather “It’s quarter to nine,” which is appropriate for the metaphorical meaning of the question.
5. The hearer assigns an *intended* meaning to the utterance. The person on the bus intended to find out what time of day it was, even though the literal meaning didn’t directly convey that message. How often do misunderstandings stem from incorrect assumptions that are made on the hearer’s part about the intended meaning of the speaker? Such breakdowns can be caused by careless speech, inattention of the hearer, conceptual complexity, contextual miscues, psychological barriers, and a host of other performance variables.
6. The hearer determines whether information should be retained in *short-term* or *long-term* memory. Short-term memory—a matter of a few seconds—is appropriate in contexts that call for a quick oral response from the hearer. Long-term memory is more common when, say, you are processing information in a lecture. There are, of course, many points in between.

7. The hearer deletes the form in which the message was originally received. Exact words, phrases, and sentences in normal speech acts are quickly forgotten, “pruned” of cognitive “clutter.” Instead, the important information, if any (see item 6 above), is retained conceptually. (See also *PLLT*, Chapter 4.)



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

In the video referred to in the above “classroom connections,” what could you do *after* showing the video to help students to retain information in their long-term memory? Use points 6 and 7 above to guide your thinking.

It should be clear from the foregoing that listening comprehension is certainly an *active* undertaking (Goh, 2014), but more importantly an *interactive* process. After the initial reception of sound, we human beings perform at least six other major operations on that set of sound waves. In conversational settings, of course, further interaction takes place immediately after the listening stage as the hearer becomes speaker in a response of some kind.

All of these processes are important for you to keep in mind as you teach. They are all relevant to a learner’s purpose for listening, to performance factors that may cause difficulty in processing speech, to overall principles of effective listening techniques, and to the choices you make of what techniques to use and when to use them in your classroom.

TYPES OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE

Much of our language-teaching energy is devoted to instruction in mastering English conversation. However, other forms of spoken language are also important to incorporate into a language course, especially in teaching listening comprehension. As you plan lessons or curricula, some simple categories (Nunan, 1991b) will guide your thinking:

Types of Spoken Language

A. Monologues

1. Planned/rehearsed/spoken from a written text or notes
2. Spontaneous/impromptu/unplanned

B. Dialogues

1. Interpersonal/social/conversational
2. Transactional/informational/factual

In monologues, when one speaker uses spoken language for any length of time, as in speeches, lectures, readings, news broadcasts, and the like, the hearer must process long stretches of speech without interruption—the stream of speech will go on whether or not the hearer comprehends. Planned as opposed to spontaneous monologues differ considerably in their discourse structures. Planned monologues (such as speeches and other prewritten material) usually manifest little redundancy and are therefore relatively difficult to comprehend. Spontaneous monologues (impromptu lectures and long “stories” in conversations, for example) exhibit more redundancy, which makes for ease in comprehension, but the presence of more performance variables and other hesitations (see below) can either help or hinder comprehension.

Dialogues involve two or more speakers and can be subdivided into those exchanges that promote social relationships (**interpersonal**) and those for which the purpose is to convey propositional or factual information (**transactional**). In each case, participants may have a good deal of shared knowledge (background information, schemata); therefore, the *familiarity* of the interlocutors will produce conversations with more assumptions, implications, and other meanings hidden between the lines. In conversations between or among participants who are *unfamiliar* with each other, references and meanings have to be made more explicit to assure effective comprehension. When such references are not explicit, misunderstandings can easily follow.

One could also have subdivided dialogues between those in which the hearer is a participant and those in which the hearer is an “eavesdropper.” In both cases, the above conversational descriptions apply, but the major—and highly significant—difference is that in the latter the hearer is, as in monologues, unable to interrupt or otherwise participate vocally in the negotiation of meaning.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

In interpersonal or transactional dialogues, what are some specific ways in which language forms and discourse differ, depending on whether the dialogue is among *familiar* or *unfamiliar* participants? Can you think of how *assumptions* about one’s audience are manifested in language? How would you teach some of those examples?

Remember that in all cases these categories are really not discrete, mutually exclusive domains; rather, each dichotomy, as usual, represents a continuum of possibilities. For example, everyday social conversations can easily contain elements of transactional dialogues, and vice versa. Similarly, “familiar” participants may share very little common knowledge on a particular topic. If each category, then, is viewed as an end point, you can aim your teaching at appropriate ranges in between.

WHAT MAKES LISTENING DIFFICULT?

As you contemplate designing lessons and techniques for teaching listening skills, or that have listening components in them, a number of special characteristics of spoken language need to be taken into consideration. Second language learners need to pay special attention to such factors because they strongly influence the processing of speech, and can even block comprehension if they are not attended to. In other words, they can make the listening process difficult. The following eight characteristics of spoken language are adapted from several sources (Richards, 1983; Ur, 1984; Dunkel, 1991; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

1. Clustering

In written language we are conditioned to attend to the sentence as the basic unit of organization. In spoken language, due to memory limitations and our predisposition for “chunking,” or clustering, we break down speech into smaller groups of words. Clauses are common constituents, but phrases within clauses are even more easily retained for comprehension. In teaching listening comprehension, therefore, you need to help students to pick out manageable clusters of words; sometimes second language learners will try to retain overly long constituents (a whole sentence or even several sentences), or they will err in the other direction in trying to attend to every word in an utterance.

2. Redundancy

Spoken language, unlike most written language, has a good deal of redundancy. The next time you’re in a conversation, notice the rephrasings, repetitions, elaborations, and little insertions of “I mean” and “you know.” Such redundancy helps the hearer to process meaning by offering more time and extra information. Learners can train themselves to profit from such redundancy by first becoming aware that not very new sentence or phrase will necessarily contain new information and by looking for the signals of redundancy. Consider the following excerpt of a conversation.

Jeff: Hey, Matt, how's it going?
Matt: Pretty good, Jeff. How was your weekend?
Jeff: Aw, it was terrible, I mean the worst you could imagine. You know what I mean?
Matt: Yeah, I've had those days. Well, like what happened?
Jeff: Well, you're not gonna believe this, but my girlfriend and I—you know Rachel? I think you met her at my party—anyway, she and I drove up to Point Reyes, you know, up in Marin County? So we were driving along minding our own business, you know, when this dude in one of those big ugly SUVs, you know, like a Hummer or something, comes up like three feet behind us and like tailgates us on these crazy mountain roads up there—you know what they're like. So, he's about to run me off the road, and it's all I can do to just concentrate. Then . . .

You can easily pick out quite a few redundancies in Jeff's recounting of his experience. Learners might initially get confused by this, but with some training, they can learn to take advantage of redundancies as well as other markers that provide more processing time.

3. Reduced Forms

While spoken language does indeed contain a good deal of redundancy, it also has many reduced forms and sentence fragments. Reduction can be phonological ("Djeetyet?" for "Did you eat yet?"), morphological (contractions like "I'll"), syntactic (elliptical forms like "When will you be back?" "Tomorrow, maybe."), or pragmatic (phone rings in a house, child answers and yells to another room in the house, "Mom! Phone!"). These reductions pose significant difficulties, especially for classroom learners who may have initially been exposed to the full forms of the English language.

4. Performance Variables

In spoken language, except for planned discourse (speeches, lectures, etc.), hesitations, false starts, pauses, and corrections are common. Native listeners are conditioned from very young ages to weed out such performance variables, whereas they can easily interfere with comprehension in second language learners. Imagine listening to the following verbatim excerpt of a sportsman talking about his game:

But, uh—I also—to go with this of course if you're playing well—if you're playing well then you get uptight about your game. You get keyed up and it's easy to concentrate. You know you're playing well and you know . . . in with a chance then it's easier, much easier to—you know get in there and—and start to . . . you don't have to think about it. I mean it's gotta be automatic.

In written form this looks like gibberish, but it's the kind of language we hear and process all the time. Learners have to train themselves to listen for meaning in the midst of distracting performance variables.

Everyday casual speech by native speakers also commonly contains ungrammatical forms. Some of these forms are simple performance slips. For example, "We arrived in a little town that there was no hotel anywhere" is something a native speaker could easily self-correct. Other ungrammaticality arises out of dialect differences ("I don't get no respect") that second language learners are likely to hear sooner or later.

5. Colloquial Language

Learners who have been exposed to standard written English and/or "text-book" language sometimes find it surprising and difficult to deal with colloquial language. Idioms, slang, reduced forms, and shared cultural knowledge are all manifested at some point in conversations. Colloquialisms appear in both monologues and dialogues. Contractions and other assimilations often pose difficulty for the learner of English.

6. Rate of Delivery

Virtually every language learner initially thinks that native speakers speak too fast! Actually, as Jack Richards (1983) points out, the number and length of pauses used by a speaker is more crucial to comprehension than sheer speed. Learners will nevertheless eventually need to be able to comprehend language delivered at varying rates of speed and, at times, delivered with few pauses. Unlike reading, where a person can stop and go back to reread, in listening the hearer may not always have the opportunity to stop the speaker. Instead, the stream of speech will continue to flow!

7. Stress, Rhythm, and Intonation

The prosodic features of the English language are very important for comprehension. Because English is a stress-timed language, English speech can be a terror for some learners as mouthfuls of syllables come spilling out between stress points. The sentence “The PRESident is INTERested in eLIMinating the emBARgo,” with four stressed syllables out of eighteen, theoretically takes about the same amount of time to utter as “Dead men wear plaid.” Also, intonation patterns are very significant (see Chapter 16) not just for interpreting straightforward elements such as questions, statements, and emphasis but for understanding more subtle messages like sarcasm, endearment, insult, solicitation, or praise.

8. Interaction

Unless a language learner’s objective is exclusively to master some specialized skill like monitoring radio broadcasts or attending lectures, interaction will play a large role in listening comprehension. Conversation is especially subject to all the rules of interaction: negotiation, clarification, attending signals, turn-taking, and topic nomination, maintenance, and termination (see Chapter 8 of *PLT*). So, to learn to listen is also to learn to respond and to continue a chain of listening and responding. Classroom techniques that include listening components must at some point include instruction in the two-way nature of listening. Students need to understand that good listeners (in conversation) are good responders. They know how to negotiate meaning (to give feedback, to ask for clarification, to maintain a topic) so that the process of comprehending can be complete rather than being aborted by insufficient interaction.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

In your own learning of an L2, which of these eight factors were the most challenging for you? For those most challenging areas, what, if anything, did your teacher do to help you to meet the challenge? What might you do in your teaching to help students to overcome these same difficulties?

A fourth-century Chinese proverb says it eloquently:

*Not to let a word get in the way of its sentence
 Nor to let a sentence get in the way of its intention,
 But to send your mind out to meet the intention as a guest;
 THAT is understanding.*

MICROSKILLS AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING

In his seminal article on teaching listening skills, Jack Richards (1983) provided a comprehensive taxonomy of aural skills, which he called **microskills**, involved in conversational discourse. We have adapted Richards's original microskills into a list of micro- and **macroskills**, the latter to designate skills that are technically at the *discourse* level. The former pertain to skills at the *sentence* level. Such lists are useful in helping you to break down just what it is that your learners need to actually *perform* as they acquire effective listening strategies.

One might easily assume that micro- and macroskills are synonymous with *bottom-up* and *top-down processing* (the latter to be discussed later in this chapter). However, it is conceivable that teaching some sentence-level microskills might involve a top-down approach. For example, suppose you are teaching stress patterns or intonation (microskill #3), you might easily adopt a top-down approach in which you ask students to simply listen to a stretch of spoken language without specifically having them focus on the details of stress or intonation. Likewise, an activity involving recognition of cohesive devices (macroskill #11) might lend itself to a bottom-up approach in which specific devices are initially listed and explained, and only later provided in stretches of meaningful discourse.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Look at the list of seventeen micro- and macroskills, and think about others (besides #3 and #11) in which a *microskill* could be approached from the "top down," and a *macroskill* could be taught through "bottom-up" processing.

Through a checklist of micro- and macroskills, you can get a good idea of what your techniques need to cover in the domain of listening comprehension. As you plan a specific technique or listening module, such a list helps you to focus on clearly conceptualized objectives. And in your evaluation of listening, these micro- and macroskills can become testing criteria. The items on page 327 comprise just such a checklist, adapted from Richards and other sources.

It is important to note that these seventeen skills apply to conversational discourse. Less interactive forms of discourse, such as listening to monologues like

Micro- and Macroskills of Listening Comprehension (Adapted from Richards, 1983)

Microskills

1. Retain chunks of language of different lengths in short-term memory.
2. Discriminate among the distinctive sounds of English.
3. Recognize English stress patterns, words in stressed and unstressed positions, rhythmic structure, intonational contours, and their role in signaling information.
4. Recognize reduced forms of words.
5. Distinguish word boundaries, recognize a core of words, and interpret word order patterns and their significance.
6. Process speech at different rates of delivery.
7. Process speech containing pauses, errors, corrections, and other performance variables.
8. Recognize grammatical word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), systems (e.g., tense, agreement, pluralization), patterns, rules, and elliptical forms.
9. Detect sentence constituents and distinguish between major and minor constituents.
10. Recognize that a particular meaning may be expressed in different grammatical forms.

Macroskills

11. Recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse.
12. Recognize the communicative functions of utterances, according to situations, participants, goals.
13. Infer situations, participants, goals using real-world knowledge.
14. From events, ideas, etc., described, predict outcomes, infer links and connections between events, deduce causes and effects, and detect such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification.
15. Distinguish between literal and implied meanings.
16. Use facial, kinesic, body language, and other nonverbal clues to decipher meanings.
17. Develop and use a battery of listening strategies, such as detecting key words, guessing the meaning of words from context, appealing for help, and signaling comprehension or lack thereof.

academic lectures, include further, more specific micro- and macroskills (Flowerdew, 1994; Blackwell & Naber, 2006; Sarosy & Sherak, 2006). Students in an academic setting need to be able to perform such things as identifying the structure of a lecture, weeding out what may be irrelevant or tangential, detecting the possible biases of the speaker, critically evaluating the speaker's assertions, and developing means (through note-taking, for example) of retaining the content of a lecture.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Which one or two microskills and one or two macroskills do you think present the *most* difficulty for L2 learners in general? What kinds of tasks or activities might help students to meet the challenges of acquiring those skills?

TYPES OF CLASSROOM LISTENING PERFORMANCE

With literally hundreds of possible techniques available for teaching listening skills, it will be helpful for you to think in terms of several kinds of listening performance—that is, what your students do in a listening technique. Sometimes these types of performance are embedded in a broader technique or task, and sometimes they are themselves the sum total of the activity of a technique.

1. Reactive

Sometimes you want a learner simply to listen to the surface structure of an utterance for the sole purpose of repeating it back to you. While this kind of listening performance requires little meaningful processing, it nevertheless may be a legitimate, even though a minor, aspect of an interactive, communicative classroom. This role of the listener as merely a “tape recorder” (Nunan 1991b, p. 18) is very limited because the listener is not generating meaning. About the only role that reactive listening can play in an interactive classroom is in brief choral or individual drills that focus on pronunciation.

2. Intensive

Techniques whose only purpose is to focus on components (phonemes, words, intonation, discourse markers, etc.) of discourse may be considered to be intensive—as opposed to extensive—in their requirement that students single out certain elements of spoken language. They include the bottom-up skills (see p. 260) that are important at all levels of proficiency. Examples of intensive listening performance include the following:

- Students listen for cues in certain choral or individual drills.
- The teacher repeats a word or sentence several times to “imprint” it in the students’ mind.

- The teacher asks students to listen to a sentence or a longer stretch of discourse and to notice a specified element, such as intonation, stress, a contraction, or a grammatical structure.

3. Responsive

A significant proportion of classroom listening activity consists of short stretches of teacher language designed to elicit immediate responses. The students' task in such listening is to process the teacher talk immediately and to fashion an appropriate reply. Examples include

- asking questions ("How are you today?" "What did you do last night?")
- giving commands ("Take a sheet of paper and a pencil.")
- seeking clarification ("What was that word you said?")
- checking comprehension ("So, how many people were in the elevator when the power went out?").

4. Selective

In longer stretches of discourse such as monologues of a couple of minutes or considerably longer, the task of the student is not to process everything that was said, but rather to *scan* the material selectively for certain information. The purpose of such performance is not to look for global or general meanings, necessarily, but to be able to find important information in a field of potentially distracting information. Such activity requires field independence (see *PLLT*, Chapter 5) on the part of the learner. Selective listening differs from intensive listening in that the discourse is in relatively long lengths. Examples of such discourse include

- speeches
- media broadcasts
- stories and anecdotes
- conversations in which learners are "eavesdroppers."

Techniques promoting selective listening skills could ask students to listen for

- people's names
- dates
- certain facts or events
- location, situation, context, etc.
- main ideas and/or conclusion.

5. Extensive

This sort of performance, unlike the intensive processing (item 2) described above, aims to develop a top-down, global understanding of spoken language. For students in classrooms, extensive performance typically involves listening to lectures and other impromptu teacher monologues, commonly referred to as *academic listening*. Such listening may require the learner to invoke other

interactive skills (e.g., note-taking, asking questions, discussion) for full comprehension (Flowerdew & Miller, 2014). However, sometimes conversations involve attending to “a long story,” explanations, or descriptions, requiring the hearer to derive a comprehensive meaning or purpose.

6. Interactive

Finally, there is listening performance that can include all five of the above types as learners actively participate in discussions, debates, conversations, role-plays, and other pair and group work. Their listening performance must be intricately integrated with speaking (and perhaps other) skills in the authentic give and take of communicative interchange.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

The six types of listening performance listed here imply a gradual increase in language ability as you progress up the scale from 1 to 6. Nevertheless, under what circumstances in *advanced* levels would reactive (#1), intensive (#2), and responsive (#3) performance be beneficial? What are some examples of activities or tasks that are appropriate at this level?

PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS

Several decades of research and practice in teaching listening comprehension have yielded some practical principles for designing classroom aural comprehension techniques. These principles should help you to create your own techniques and activities. Some of them, especially the second and third, actually apply to any technique; the others are more germane to listening.

1. Include a Focus on Listening in an Integrated-Skills Course

Assuming that your curriculum is dedicated to the integration of all four skills, remember that each of the separate skills deserves special focus in appropriate doses. It is easy to adopt a philosophy of just letting students “experience” language without careful attention to component skills. Because aural comprehension itself cannot be overtly “observed” (see item 4 below), teachers sometimes incorrectly assume that the input provided in the classroom will be converted into learners’ long-term competence. The creation of effective listening techniques requires studied attention to all the principles of listening already summarized in this chapter.

2. Use Techniques That Are Stimulating and Motivating

Appeal to listeners’ personal interests and goals. Because background information (schemata) is an important factor in listening, take into full account

the experiences, goals, and abilities of your students as you design lessons. Also, remember that the cultural background(s) of your students can be both facilitating and interfering in the process of listening. Then, once a technique is launched, try to construct it in such a way that students are caught up in the activity and feel self-propelled toward its final objective.

3. Utilize Authentic Language and Contexts

Authentic language and real-world tasks enable students to see the relevance of classroom activity to their long-term communicative goals. If you introduce natural texts (conversations, media broadcasts, stories, speeches) rather than concocted, artificial material, students will more readily dive into the activity.

4. Include Pre-, While-, and Post-Listening Techniques

Learning to listen is not merely a matter of repeated listening, over and over, until the student “gets it.” For classroom lessons that involve a focus on a major listening event (such as an audio/video presentation, a news broadcast, or a teacher’s planned lecture), effective lessons have been found to include three major stages (Richards & Burns, 2012).

The first is a schemata-activating process that helps the learner to prepare for listening by checking vocabulary, ascertaining background knowledge that is essential for understanding, gaining a hint of what the topic is, and exploring any contextual factors that might otherwise make the listening difficult.

The second stage is one that can easily be neglected. You might assume that telling your students simply to “listen to the audio/video” that you’re about to play is sufficient. Not true! Effective pedagogy will give students something to “do” *while* they are listening: for example, take notes, fill in a chart, note a sequence of events, listen for the main idea, listen for certain details. Remember, listening is an active process, so make sure your students are actively doing something while they listen.

Finally, what will students do *after* the presentation? We commonly think of questions or discussions to check comprehension, but this is only one form of post-listening activity that you can do. You might plan any of the following: a vocabulary or grammar check, difficulties that students had in comprehension (rapidity of speech, length, discourse complexity, content complexity), and/or extensions of the content of the listening passage to other related content. This phase might involve everything from processing a handout to a general discussion, to a debate.

5. Carefully Consider the Form of Listeners’ Responses

Comprehension itself is not externally observable. We cannot peer into a learner’s brain through a little window and empirically observe what is stored there after someone else has said something. We can only *infer* that certain things have been comprehended through students’ overt (verbal or nonverbal)

responses to speech. It is therefore important for teachers to design techniques in such a way that students' responses indicate whether or not their comprehension has been correct. Lund (1990) offered nine different ways that we can check listeners' comprehension:



GUIDELINES FOR DETERMINING A LISTENER'S COMPREHENSION

- doing—the listener responds physically to a command
- choosing—the listener selects from alternatives such as pictures, objects, and texts
- transferring—the listener draws a picture of what is heard
- answering—the listener answers questions about the message
- condensing—the listener outlines or takes notes on a lecture
- extending—the listener provides an ending to a story heard
- duplicating—the listener translates the message into the native language or repeats it verbatim
- modeling—the listener orders a meal, for example, after listening to a model order
- conversing—the listener engages in a conversation that indicates appropriate processing of information

6. Encourage the Development of Listening Strategies

Most foreign language students are simply not aware of how to listen. One of your jobs is to equip them with listening strategies that extend beyond the classroom. Draw their attention to the value of such strategies as the following:



STRATEGIES FOR LISTENING COMPREHENSION

- looking for key words
- looking for nonverbal cues to meaning
- predicting a speaker's purpose by the context of the spoken discourse
- associating information with one's existing cognitive structure (activating background information)
- guessing at meanings
- seeking clarification
- listening for the general gist
- various test-taking strategies for listening comprehension



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

When you were learning an L2, did you use any of the above strategies? Or did your teacher encourage them? How would you implement these strategies in lessons designed to help learners to improve their listening skills?

As you “teach learners how to learn” by helping them to develop their overall strategic competence (see Chapter 16), strategies for effective listening can become a highly significant part of their chances for successful learning.

7. Include Both Bottom-Up and Top-Down Listening Techniques

Speech-processing theory distinguishes between two types of processing in both listening and reading comprehension. **Bottom-up processing** proceeds from sounds to words to grammatical relationships to lexical meanings, and so on, to a final “message.” **Top-down processing** is evoked from “a bank of prior knowledge and global expectations” (Morley, 1991a, p. 87) and other background information (schemata) that the listener brings to the text.

Bottom-up techniques typically focus on the “bits and pieces” of language, breaking language into component parts and giving them central focus. Top-down techniques are more concerned with the activation of schemata, with deriving meaning, with global understanding, and with the interpretation of a text. It is important for learners to operate from both directions because both can offer keys to determining the meaning of spoken discourse. But in a communicative, interactive context, you don’t want to dwell too heavily on the bottom-up techniques, for to do so may hamper the development of a learner’s all-important automaticity in processing speech.

LISTENING TECHNIQUES FROM BEGINNING TO ADVANCED

Techniques for teaching listening will vary considerably across the proficiency continuum. Chapter 7 has already dealt with general characteristics. Listening techniques are no exception to the general rule. Table 15.1 (pages 334–338) provides three lists of techniques for each of three proficiency levels. Each list is broken down into bottom-up, top-down, and interactive types of activity.

The importance of listening comprehension in language learning should by now be quite apparent. As we move on to look at speaking skills, always remember the ever-present relationship among all four skills and the necessity in authentic, interactive classes to integrate these skills even as you focus on the specifics of one skill area.

Table 15.1 Techniques for teaching listening comprehension (adapted from Peterson, 1991, pp. 114–121)

FOR BEGINNING-LEVEL LISTENERS**Bottom-Up Exercises**1. Goal: *Discriminating Between Intonation Contours in Sentences*

Listen to a sequence of sentence patterns with either rising or falling intonation.

Place a check in column 1 (rising) or column 2 (falling), depending on the pattern you hear.

2. Goal: *Discriminating Between Phonemes*

Listen to pairs of words. Some pairs differ in their final consonant, and some pairs are the same. Circle the word "same" or "different," depending on what you hear.

3. Goal: *Selective Listening for Morphological Endings*

Listen to a series of sentences. Circle "yes" if the verb has an -ed ending, and circle "no" if it does not.

Listen to a series of sentences. On your answer sheet, circle the one (of three) verb forms contained in the sentence that you hear.

4. Goal: *Selecting Details from the Text (Word Recognition)*

Match a word that you hear with its picture.

Listen to a weather report. Look at a list of words and circle the words that you hear.

Listen to a sentence that contains clock time. Circle the clock time that you hear, among three choices (5:30, 5:45, 6:15).

Listen to an advertisement, select the price of an item, and write the amount on a price tag.

Listen to a series of recorded telephone messages from an answering machine. Fill in a chart with the following information from each caller: name, number, time, and message.

5. Goal: *Listening for Normal Sentence Word Order*

Listen to a short dialogue and fill in the missing words that have been deleted in a partial transcript.

Top-Down Exercises6. Goal: *Discriminating Between Emotional Reactions*

Listen to a sequence of utterances. Place a check in the column that describes the emotional reaction that you hear: interested, happy, surprised, or unhappy.

7. Goal: *Getting the Cist of a Sentence*

Listen to a sentence describing a picture and select the correct picture.

8. Goal: *Recognize the Topic*

Listen to a dialogue and decide where the conversation occurred. Circle the correct location among three multiple-choice items.

Listen to a conversation and look at the pictured greeting cards. Decide which of the greeting cards was sent. Write the greeting under the appropriate card.

Listen to a conversation and decide what the people are talking about. Choose the picture that shows the topic.

Table 15.1 Techniques for teaching listening comprehension (*Continued*)**Interactive Exercises**

9. Goal: *Build a Semantic Network of Word Associations*
Listen to a word and associate all the related words that come to mind.
10. Goal: *Recognize a Familiar Word and Relate It to a Category*
Listen to words from a shopping list and match each word to the store that sells it.
11. Goal: *Following Directions*
Listen to a description of a route and trace it on a map.

FOR INTERMEDIATE LEVEL LISTENERS**Bottom-Up Exercises**

12. Goal: *Recognizing Fast Speech Forms*
Listen to a series of sentences that contain unstressed function words. Circle your choice among three words on the answer sheet—for example: "up," "a," "of."
13. Goal: *Finding the Stressed Syllable*
Listen to words of two (or three) syllables. Mark them for word stress and predict the pronunciation of the unstressed syllable.
14. Goal: *Recognizing Words with Reduced Syllables*
Read a list of polysyllabic words and predict which syllabic vowel will be dropped.
Listen to the words read in fast speech and confirm your prediction.
15. Goal: *Recognize Words as They Are Linked in the Speech Stream*
Listen to a series of short sentences with consonant/vowel linking between words. Mark the linkages on your answer sheet.
16. Goal: *Recognizing Pertinent Details in the Speech Stream*
Listen to a short dialogue between a boss and a secretary regarding changes in the daily schedule. Use an appointment calendar. Cross out appointments that are being changed and write in new ones.
Listen to announcements of airline arrivals and departures. With a model of an airline information board in front of you, fill in the flight numbers, destinations, gate numbers, and departure times.
Listen to a series of short dialogues after reading questions that apply to the dialogues. While listening, find the answers to questions about prices, places, names, and numbers. Example: "Where are the shoppers?" "How much is whole wheat bread?"
Listen to a short telephone conversation between a customer and a service station manager. Fill in a chart that lists the car repairs that must be done. Check the part of the car that needs repair, the reason, and the approximate cost.

Top-Down Exercises

17. Goal: *Analyze Discourse Structure to Suggest Effective Listening Strategies*
Listen to six radio commercials with attention to the use of music, repetition of key words, and number of speakers. Talk about the effect these techniques have on the listeners.
18. Goal: *Listen to Identify the Speaker or the Topic*
Listen to a series of radio commercials. On your answer sheet, choose among four types of sponsors or products and identify the picture that goes with the commercial.

(Continued)

Table 15.1 Techniques for teaching listening comprehension (*Continued*)

19. Goal: *Listen to Evaluate Themes and Motives*
 Listen to a series of radio commercials. On your answer sheet are four possible motives that the companies use to appeal to their customers. Circle all the motives that you feel each commercial promotes: escape from reality, family security, snob appeal, sex appeal.
20. Goal: *Finding Main Ideas and Supporting Details*
 Listen to a short conversation between two friends. On your answer sheet are scenes from television programs. Find and write the name of the program and the channel. Decide which speaker watched which program.
21. Goal: *Making Inferences*
 Listen to a series of sentences, which may be either statements or questions. After each sentence, answer inferential questions such as "Where might the speaker be?" "How might the speaker be feeling?" "What might the speaker be referring to?"
 Listen to a series of sentences. After each sentence, suggest a possible context for the sentence (place, situation, time, participants).

Interactive Exercises

22. Goal: *Discriminating Between Registers of Speech and Tones of Voice*
 Listen to a series of sentences. On your answer sheet, mark whether the sentence is polite or impolite.
23. Goal: *Recognize Missing Grammar Markers in Colloquial Speech*
 Listen to a series of short questions in which the auxiliary verb and subject have been deleted. Use grammatical knowledge to fill in the missing words: ("Have you) got some extra?"
 Listen to a series of questions with reduced verb auxiliary and subject and identify the missing verb (does it/is it) by checking the form of the main verb. Example: "'Zit come with anything else? 'Zit arriving on time?"
24. Goal: *Use Knowledge of Reduced Forms to Clarify the Meaning of an Utterance*
 Listen to a short sentence containing a reduced form. Decide what the sentence means.
 On your answer sheet, choose the one (of three) alternatives that is the best paraphrase of the sentence you heard. Example: You hear "You can't be happy with that." You read:
 (a) "Why can't you be happy?" (b) "That will make you happy." (c) "I don't think you are happy."
25. Goal: *Use Context to Build Listening Expectations*
 Read a short want-ad describing job qualifications from the employment section of a newspaper. Brainstorm additional qualifications that would be important for that type of job.
26. Goal: *Listen to Confirm Your Expectations*
 Listen to short radio advertisements for jobs that are available. Check the job qualifications against your expectations.
27. Goal: *Use Context to Build Expectations. Use Bottom-Up Processing to Recognize Missing Words. Compare Your Predictions to What You Actually Heard*
 Read some telephone messages with missing words. Decide what kinds of information are missing so you know what to listen for. Listen to the information and fill in the blanks. Finally, discuss with the class what strategies you used for your predictions.

Table 15.1 Techniques for teaching listening comprehension (*Continued*)

28. Goal: *Use Incomplete Sensory Data and Cultural Background Information to Construct a More Complete Understanding of a Text*
 Listen to one side of a telephone conversation. Decide what the topic of the conversation might be and create a title for it.
 Listen to the beginning of a conversation between two people and answer questions about the number of participants, their ages, gender, and social roles. Guess the time of day, location, temperature, season, and topic. Choose among some statements to guess what might come next.

FOR ADVANCED LEVEL LEARNERS**Bottom-Up Exercises**

29. Goal: *Use Features of Sentence Stress and Volume to Identify Important Information for Note-Taking*
 Listen to a number of sentences and extract the content words, which are read with greater stress. Write the content words as notes.
30. Goal: *Become Aware of Sentence-Level Features in Lecture Text*
 Listen to a segment of a lecture while reading a transcript of the material. Notice the incomplete sentences, pauses, and verbal fillers.
31. Goal: *Become Aware of Organizational Cues in Lecture Text*
 Look at a lecture transcript and circle all the cue words used to enumerate the main points. Then listen to the lecture segment and note the organizational cues.
32. Goal: *Become Aware of Lexical and Suprasegmental Markers for Definitions*
 Read a list of lexical cues that signal a definition; listen to signals of the speaker's intent, such as rhetorical questions; listen to special intonation patterns and pause patterns used with appositives.
 Listen to short lecture segments that contain new terms and their definitions in context. Use knowledge of lexical and intonational cues to identify the definition of the word.
33. Goal: *Identify Specific Points of Information*
 Read a skeleton outline of a lecture in which the main categories are given but the specific examples are left blank. Listen to the lecture and find the information that belongs in the blanks.

Top-Down Exercises

34. Goal: *Use the Introduction to the Lecture to Predict Its Focus and Direction*
 Listen to the introductory section of a lecture. Then read a number of topics on your answer sheet and choose the topic that best expresses what the lecture will discuss.
35. Goal: *Use the Lecture Transcript to Predict the Content of the Next Section*
 Read a section of a lecture transcript. Stop reading at a juncture point and predict what will come next. Then read on to confirm your prediction.
36. Goal: *Find the Main Idea of a Lecture Segment*
 Listen to a section of a lecture that describes a statistical trend. While you listen, look at three graphs that show a change over time and select the graph that best illustrates the lecture.

(Continued)

Table 15.1 Techniques for teaching listening comprehension (*Continued*)**Interactive Exercises**

37. Goal: *Use Incoming Details to Determine the Accuracy of Predictions about Content*
 Listen to the introductory sentences to predict some of the main ideas you expect to hear in the lecture. Then listen to the lecture. Note whether or not the instructor talks about the points you predicted. If she/he does, note a detail about the point.
38. Goal: *Determine the Main Ideas of a Section of a Lecture by Analysis of the Details in That Section*
 Listen to a section of a lecture and take notes on the important details. Then relate the details to form an understanding of the main point of that section. Choose from a list of possible controlling ideas.
39. Goal: *Make Inferences by Identifying Ideas on the Sentence Level That Lead to Evaluative Statements*
 Listen to a statement and take notes on the important words. Indicate what further meaning can be inferred from the statement. Indicate the words in the original statement. Indicate the words in the original statement that serve to cue the inference.
40. Goal: *Use Knowledge of the Text and the Lecture Content to Fill in Missing Information*
 Listen to a lecture segment for its gist. Then listen to a statement from which words have been omitted. Using your knowledge of the text and of the general content, fill in the missing information. Check your understanding by listening to the entire segment.
41. Goal: *Use Knowledge of the Text and the Lecture Content to Discover the Lecturer's Misstatements and to Supply the Ideas That He Meant to Say*
 Listen to a lecture segment that contains an incorrect term. Write the incorrect term and the term that the lecturer should have used. Finally, indicate what clues helped you find the misstatement.

**CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

The list of listening techniques in Table 15.1 is quite exhaustive, and possibly exhausting to read! Choose a few at random at each level and imagine (or script out) how you would implement each technique in a context of your choice. Technique #26, for example, is very briefly described, leaving a lot to the teacher's creativity to implement. What details need to be added?

A SAMPLE LISTENING LESSON

Now that a number of principles and practical pedagogical strategies have been outlined, let's take a look at a sample lesson in listening comprehension and pose some questions about the extent to which the lesson exemplified (or not) the guidelines. This is an outline of a unit from the second of a three-volume series of books on listening comprehension (Bohlke & Rogers, 2011, pp. 85–90). Unit 5, titled "The Whale's Tale," focuses on listening for main ideas, sequences of events, and listening for details.

Unit 5. The Whale's Tale (from Bohlke & Rogers, 2011, pp. 85–90)**A. Warm Up** (Photo of diver next to a whale caught in fishing ropes)

[Work with a partner. Discuss the questions.]

- What do you know about whales?
- What do you see in the picture?
- What do you think is happening?

B. Before You Listen

[Match the words. Complete the sentences.]

- Matching exercise, ten vocabulary items, e.g., *rescue*, *tangled*, *trap*
- Fill-in-the-blank, ten sentences, using the same vocabulary, e.g., *My headphone cord is always getting _____.*
It's annoying!

C. While You Listen**First Listening**

[Sequence: Number the events in order.]

- Ten sentences, e.g., *A rescue team arrives.*

[Main Idea: Check the statement that best describes the main idea.]

- Four options, e.g., *Divers have to enter cold water to rescue whales.*

Second Listening

[Details: Listen to the talk again. Complete your sentences. One student is A and the other is B. Work in pairs, reading your completed sentences to your partner.]

- Examples of sentences: *They used their _____ to call an environmental group. The whale swam in _____ around them.*

D. After You Listen

[With your partner use your completed sentences to answer the questions.]

- Ten questions, e.g., *When and where did this event happen?*
[In groups, discuss these questions.]
- Five questions, e.g., *Do you think the whale was really thanking the rescuers?*

What are some other ways that human activities such as fishing can be dangerous to human life?

To what extent did this unit utilize the guidelines presented in this chapter? Even though you have not been given the complete lesson here, nor do you know exactly what was presented to students, try asking yourself the following questions:

- What *type* of spoken language was featured?
- How did the lesson include student interaction?
- What types of listening performance were used?
- Was the subject matter (as far as you can tell) stimulating and interesting?
- What were the pre-, while-, and post-listening tasks?
- What forms of listener response were used?
- What strategies were students encouraged to use?
- Were students encouraged to use bottom-up and top-down strategies?
- Based on the synopsis above, how would you go about assessing the success of students' performance?



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Judging from what you see above, a synopsis of the “whale” lesson, how effective do you think it was? If you were given this lesson to teach, imagine an appropriate audience, and ask yourself what you would add (perhaps to personalize it). Would you delete anything? Or would you change or modify any of the elements for your presumed audience?

ASSESSING LISTENING IN THE CLASSROOM

Every classroom lesson involves some form of assessment, whether it's in the form of informal, unplanned, and intuitive teacher processing and feedback, or in formal, prepared, scored tests. In order to appropriately call some attention to this very important role that teachers must assume, we offer—in this and the next three chapters on the four skills—a few principles and practical guidelines for assessing those skills in the classroom. For a much more comprehensive treatment of the assessment of the four skills, as well as background research and theory, we refer you to *Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practices* (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Buck's (2001) detailed look at the assessment of listening is also very useful.

Disambiguating the Terms *Assessment* and *Test*

Before specifically considering the topic of assessing listening in particular, a word is in order about two commonly used terms. It's tempting at times to simply think that **assessment** and **test** are synonymous, appearing in free variation

depending on the whim of the speaker or writer. A glance at some teacher reference books of ten or more years ago could bear out such an assumption. However, in recent years, thankfully, the profession seems to have come to an appropriate consensus that the two terms are, in fact, *not* synonymous.

Tests are a subset of assessment. Assessment is an ongoing pedagogical process that includes a number of evaluative acts on the part of the teacher. When a student responds to a question, offers a comment, or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an evaluation of the student's performance. A student's written work, from notes or short answers to essays, is judged by the teacher. In reading and listening activities, students' responses are implicitly evaluated. All that is assessment. Technically it is referred to as **informal assessment**—because it is usually unplanned and spontaneous and without specific scoring or grading formats, as opposed to **formal assessment**, which is more deliberate and usually has conventionalized feedback. Tests fall into the latter category. They are planned sets of tasks or exercises, with designated time frames, often announced in advance, prepared for (and sometimes feared) by students, and they characteristically offer specific scoring or grading formats.



CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

From your own experience learning an L2 or teaching one, what are some examples of informal and formal assessments? Are there some that fall in between the two? What purposes does each of your examples fulfill?

In considering classroom assessment, then, be prepared to entertain a range of possible pedagogical procedures. In the comments that follow, for the most part more formal aspects of assessment are implied. The informal processes have already been subsumed into the various guidelines and examples of this chapter.

One of the first observations that needs to be made in considering assessment is that listening is *unobservable*. You cannot directly see or measure or otherwise observe either the process or the product of aural comprehension. Oh, yes, we can hear you saying that if you ask someone to close the window, and they close it, you have observed aural comprehension. Or that if someone nods and says, "uh-huh," while you're talking, you have evidence of comprehension. Well, what you have in these cases is indeed *evidence* of comprehension, but you have not actually observed receptors sending messages to the brain, nor of the brain's processing of sound and converting it to meaning. So, when it comes to assessing listening, we're pretty well stuck with reliance on our best *inference* in determining comprehension. How you do that, and remain as accurate in your assessment as possible, is the challenge of assessing listening.

Assessing Types of Listening and Micro- and Macroskills

In this chapter, we have already looked at types of listening, from intensive listening on up to extensive and interactive. We have also considered the micro- and macroskills of listening, from processing tiny bits and pieces of language to strategic, interactive, and complex skills of extended discourse. These two related taxonomies are indispensable to valid, reliable assessment of students' listening comprehension ability. The more closely you can pinpoint exactly *what* you want to assess, the more reliably will you draw your conclusions.

What assessment methods (tasks, item formats) are commonly used at the various levels? Consider the following list of sample tasks (not an exhaustive list, by any means), and for further information consult Brown and Abeywickrama (2010).

The fifth category of listening, interactive tasks, is deliberately omitted from this list since such interaction involves speaking and will be covered in the next chapter. With this brief outline, we hope you can gain a bit of a picture of some assessment possibilities in listening comprehension.

Table 15.2 Tasks for assessing listening

- | |
|--|
| 1. Intensive listening tasks |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • distinguishing phonemic pairs (<i>grass-glass; leave-live</i>) • distinguishing morphological pairs (<i>miss-missed</i>) • distinguishing stress patterns (<i>I can go; I can't go</i>) • paraphrase recognition (<i>I come from Taiwan; I'm Taiwanese</i>) • repetition (S repeats a word) |
| 2. Responsive listening tasks |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • question (<i>What time is it?</i> – multiple choice [MC] response) • question (<i>What time is it?</i> – open-ended response) • simple discourse sequences (<i>Hello. Nice weather. Tough test.</i>) |
| 3. Selective listening tasks |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening cloze (Ss fill in blanks) • verbal information transfer (Ss give MC verbal response) • picture-cued information transfer (Ss choose a picture) • chart completion (Ss fill in a grid) • sentence repetition (Ss repeat stimulus sentence) |
| 4. Extensive listening tasks |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dictation (Ss listen [usually three times] and write a paragraph) • dialogue (Ss hear dialogue – MC comprehension questions) • dialogue (Ss hear dialogue – open ended response) • lecture (Ss take notes; summarize; list main points; etc.) • interpretive tasks (Ss hear a poem – interpret meaning) • stories, narratives (Ss retell a story) |

FOR THE TEACHER: ACTIVITIES (A) & DISCUSSION (D)

Note: For each of the “Classroom Connections” in this chapter, you may wish to turn them into individual or pair-work discussion questions.

1. **(A)** Direct pairs to review the difference between language that learners are merely exposed to (input) and language that is *internalized*. Ask them to illustrate with classroom examples how input gets internalized in long-term competence. Ask the pairs to brainstorm ideas or strategies for helping students to internalize language that they are exposed to. Have them report their examples to the class.
2. **(D)** Pick an English language news program and audio-record a two- or three-minute segment (or stream it in video form for the class). In class, ask students to listen to the excerpt and identify “clusters” of words that form thought groups. Then ask students to brainstorm hints they could give to L2 learners to help them to listen to such clusters rather than to each separate word.
3. **(A)** Instruct pairs to specifically identify the redundant words/phrases in the conversation between Matt and Jeff (p. 323), and to brainstorm how they would teach students (a) to use such redundancies for comprehension and (b) to overlook them when comprehension is already sufficient.
4. **(D)** Audio-record (or video on a phone or camera, and feed to a laptop/projector) a casual conversation between two native speakers of English. In class, play the conversation and ask your students to pick out as many “performance variables” as they can. How do these performance variables differ from those of a learner of English? Can L2 learners be taught to overlook or to compensate for such naturally occurring performance variables?
5. **(A)** Divide the taxonomy of listening microskills and macroskills (Table 15.1) among as many pairs as you can in the class, perhaps two per pair. Ask them to come up with an example of their skill. Do the same, in another activity, with the six types of classroom listening performance (pp. 328–330). Ask the pairs to share examples of each and discuss their appropriateness in the classroom.
6. **(A)** As a whole class, review the seven principles for effective listening techniques on pages 330–333. Then, assign to pairs one or two of the 41 techniques outlined in Table 15.2, and have them systematically evaluate the techniques they have been given. Their evaluation should be based on the six principles. Ask them to share their results with the rest of the class.
7. **(D)** One type of listening technique (combined with writing) not considered in this chapter is dictation (only mentioned in the final section on assessment). How useful is dictation? What are the pros and cons of using dictation in a classroom?

FOR YOUR FURTHER READING

- Richards, J., & Burns, A. (2012). *Tips for teaching listening: A practical approach*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
A highly practical manual detailing practical classroom techniques for teaching listening, including dozens of handouts and activities for all levels.
- Brown, S. (2011). *Listening myths*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
An easily understood, practical primer on the nature of L2 listening, focusing on a number of popular misconceptions about listening.
- Brown, G. (2010). Listening in a second language. In M. Berns (Ed.), *Concise encyclopedia of applied linguistics* (pp. 157–163). Oxford, UK: Elsevier.
- Flowerdew, J., & Miller, L. (2005). *Second language listening: Theory and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Vandergrift, L., & Goh, C. (2011). *Teaching and learning second language listening: Metacognition in action*. New York, NY: Routledge.
All three resources offer in-depth coverage of research on listening comprehension, as well as practical classroom implications, and include extensive bibliographies.
- Brown, H. D., & Abeywickrama, P. (2010). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
A survey of language assessment in general, with Chapter 7 devoted to assessing listening. The material is classroom-based and does not require technical knowledge in the field of assessment to comprehend and apply.