

Are You Listening? The Practical Components of Listening Comprehension

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ABSTRACT *Language has three dimensions: (1) linear, (2) structural, and (3) experiential. Listening also involves the following components, which evolve out of the realization of the three dimensions: (1) the sonic realization, (2) the segmental/suprasegmental form, (3) the musical pitch and rhythm, (4) the lexical phrasing, (5) the purpose of the message intended by the speaker, and (6) the actualization of the message in the listener. The author discusses the practical aspects of listening comprehension exercises, focusing on sources such as (1) the teacher, (2) other speakers of the target language, (3) recordings of radio broadcasts, music, speeches, etc., (4) films and television programs, and (5) commercially produced language laboratory films.*

Introduction

Language may be said to have three dimensions: (1) a linear dimension, (2) a structural dimension, and (3) an experiential dimension. The linear dimension consists of sounds and utterances as they are spoken in real time or printed on a page. The structural dimension involves the systems and sub-systems that determine which sounds and utterances and which lines of print are produced, when they are produced, and in what order. The experiential dimension represents all uses (and

abuses) to which language is put, as well as all the "experiences" (impressions, motivations, feelings, reactions) that a person retains from exposure to language.¹

The point here is that language has not only forms, but also functions. It has depth and not just surface. It accomplishes things and does not merely exist in a vacuum. A concentration on one or more specific aspects of any one dimension may be necessary from a pedagogical point of view, but if it is not (re)integrated into the experiences of the learner, then long-term learning cannot take place.

All of this underscores the fact that listening is tightly interwoven with other language skills. Let us begin by clarifying what is meant by listening. First of all, it is not a skill, but a set of skills all marked by the fact that they involve the aural perception of oral signals. Secondly, listening is not "passive." A person can *hear* something but not be *listening*. His or her short-term memory may completely discard certain incoming sounds but concentrate on others. This involves a dynamic interaction between perception of sounds and concentration on content. Thirdly, while listening may not be necessary in order to translate written texts, it is absolutely necessary for almost any other work with language, especially for speaking, and even for writing.

In 1971 Rivers described the active listening process as proceeding in three stages: (1) "sensing" rapid impressions from speech flow, (2) "identification through segmentation of grouping" of individual parts of the spoken utterance, and (3)

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"rehearsal and recoding" of the material for long-term storage. In the discussion to follow we shall see how these processes work in practice.²

Krashen indicates that for successful language acquisition to take place there must be meaningful "intake." Specifically, he says, "the major function of the second language classroom is to provide intake for acquisition."³ The major channel for "meaningful intake" in the classroom is the auditory channel. In order to understand this better, it is necessary to examine the components of listening and listening comprehension.

Listening and Listening Comprehension

Listening consists of the following components:

- (1) the sonic realization,
- (2) the segmental/suprasegmental form,
- (3) the musical pitch and rhythm,
- (4) the lexical phrasing,
- (5) the purpose of the message intended by the speaker, and
- (6) the actualization of the message in the listener.

1. The sonic aspect of listening involves the actual physical "hearing" of language. Disregarding physical impairment, just about anybody can recognize human speech sounds as "language," and can distinguish such sounds from other, non-language sounds, such as yawning, gargling, belching, and clearing the throat. Some people can even identify a particular language by hearing a sample of it, even if they know little or nothing else about it.

2. This leads to the segmental/suprasegmental form. One of the major requirements for meaningful second language listening is the ability to distinguish the phonemes of the language. Most dialogues in textbooks have at least this in mind, namely, to introduce and practice the individual sounds and the sound patterns of the language.

3. Musical pitch and rhythm are harder to pin down. They involve not only determining that there is a difference between *fährt* and *fällt* or between *schon* and *schön*, or that a given utterance is a question as opposed to a command, as in *Fahren Sie nach Hause?* (Are you going home?) vs. *Fahren Sie nach Hause!* (Go home!). Rather they refer to the fact that speakers exchange important information about themselves by the way they speak, not just by what they speak. Subtleties of irony, disgust, pleasure, or of age, sex, and social status, are all transmitted by speakers. They are readily picked up by language users, whether intentionally or

unintentionally. They are transmitted to language learners as well.

4. Lexical phrasing means that certain words and phrases are encoded in a particular order to get a message across. It is not enough to say that according to the grammar of the language words and phrases have to be arranged in a certain way. Within limits word order can be flexible. The flexibility is translated into segmental and suprasegmental form, and into the musical pitch and rhythm. For example, in answering the question *Fahren Sie mit dem Zug?* (Are you going by train?) it is possible to respond *Nein, ich fahre mit dem Zug nicht* (No, I'm not going by train—with falling intonation) or *Nein, ich fahre nicht mit dem Zug*. (No, I'm not going by train—with rising intonation). Both replies are grammatically legitimate, but they cannot be spoken, or listened to, in exactly the same way. The particular phrasing of the latter utterance may, in fact, be one of the reasons why its particular format is the more common of the two in German.⁴ Indeed, the grammar of most languages makes provision for alternate word order and phrasing, such as the fronting of elements other than the subject for emphasis in German, for instance the importance of "today" in *Heute spielen wir Tennis* (Today we are playing tennis) vs. *Wir spielen heute Tennis* (We are playing tennis today). Similarly the contraction of prepositional phrases is used to contrast general versus specific location, as in *Wir sitzen im Zimmer*, as opposed to *Wir sitzen in dem Zimmer* (We are sitting in the room).

Such alternatives are frequently overlooked once they go beyond the rigid prescriptions of the traditional grammar. Yet students will frequently ask why they hear a particular phrase in a particular place in a sentence, even if the topic has not yet been discussed explicitly in class.

5-6. Speakers speak because they have something to say (purpose), and listeners listen because they want or need to react to what speakers speak (experience). Normally we ask a question to get an answer, we give a command to have a particular action performed, we praise to make someone feel good, or we curse to make someone feel bad. All of this information is contained in speech. If the information and intention together are not retrieved by the listener, then there is no point in speaking in the first place. And no reason to listen either!

Sources of Material

Sources of good listening material are listed here in order of importance. Unfortunately,

0162-3

this is not necessarily their order of availability:

- (1) the teacher,
- (2) other speakers of the target language,
- (3) recordings of radio broadcasts, music, speeches, etc.
- (4) films and television programs, and
- (5) commercially-produced language laboratory tapes.

The Teacher

Teachers are obviously the first and primary source of material for listening comprehension. They are often the best source, since they can modify what students hear to what they can comprehend. Teachers should, therefore, use the target language as much as possible in the classroom. Specifically they should use it whenever they can to generate dynamically "listenable utterances," such as reacting to student responses: *gut* (good), *prima* (excellent), *das verstehe ich nicht* (I don't understand that), *nein* (no), *vielleicht* (perhaps), *na und?* (so what?). They should use them when directing classroom activities: *machen Sie das Buch auf* (Open your book), *Ruhe* (Quiet!), *Passen Sie auf!* (Pay attention!), *Wie bitte?* (Pardon?). Another important place for teacher comments is in the "recycling" of student contributions: *John sagt, er ist reich. Bist du reich, Bill?* (John says he is rich. Are you rich, Bill?), or making everyday offhand comments expressing personal feelings, like *Mensch, ist es aber heiß hier!* (Man, is it ever hot here!).

Other Speakers

Other speakers need not be natives, although they should be fluent. They also need not be physically present in the classroom. They should, however, be available to students in some way. For example, if the school has a German Club or a French Club, its members should be invited to participate in activities such as "German Table" or "French Table." Even if students do not speak extensively with other speakers, it is invaluable for listening comprehension skills to have students hear others speaking the language among themselves or with teachers. Similarly, even palavering next to the coffee pot is an excellent way for students to perceive an otherwise academic subject as a part of living, breathing, and speaking. Students should be exposed as much as possible to the language as it is actually used by fluent speakers. As long as they are not forced to make any complex oral contribution to the exchange, students will normally be unperturbed when exposed to the natural speech of native speakers, whether in person or through the broadcast media.⁵

Broadcast media

Records with target language music and speeches can usually be purchased either here or abroad, but material from the radio is not easily available to the average teacher. To obtain the latter, teachers may turn to agencies such as "Inter Naciones,"⁶ which have tapes from a variety of sources, including radio.

Using broadcast material may require some adaptation, if the work has not been done already by the distributing agency. Nevertheless, the teacher can do many simple things with unabridged radio tape material.

Take, for example, what I have done with news broadcasts. From a series of broadcasts recorded over a period of three days in Germany, I dubbed fourteen weather reports. Because weather reports are usually in a fixed, predictable format, with certain kinds of information in certain locations within the text, it is relatively easy to train students to listen to them meaningfully. I provided the students with a complete transcript of the first weather report. However, as the tape moved from one weather report to the next, part of the transcript "disappeared" Cheshire-cat-like. With the weather reports in the particular order that I wanted, I proceeded to delete certain words and phrases successively from one report transcript to the next. Report A was complete, as already indicated. Report B and following reports had no numbers written out. Report C and following had none of the more common expressions for weather conditions in them: *kalt*, *warm*, *heiß*, etc. (cold, warm, hot, etc.). Report E and following had none of the less common expressions for weather conditions in them: *heiter*, *wolkig*, *bedeckt*, etc. (clear, cloudy, overcast, etc.). Thus more and more information had to be supplied by the student, who had to increase his listening comprehension. The last three reports were complete on tape but were not transcribed for the students. The students were asked to provide the basic information about time of day, temperatures and temperature ranges, general weather conditions, and the forecast for the coming 24 hours.

Here is a sample *Wetterbericht*, representative of the hundreds broadcast every year over the *Bayrischer Rundfunk*. The original German is found in note 7.

The weather report, issued at 4 p.m. The forecast until tomorrow evening: Southern Bavaria and Danube region, including the Bavarian Forest—partly cloudy and local showers and thunder storms, primarily in the afternoon; low temperatures tonight

8 to 13 degrees (Celsius); high temperatures tomorrow 18 to 22 degrees. In the Alps above 2000 meters—around 5 degrees; mountain peaks surrounded by clouds; light, occasionally moderate winds from the northwest to the north. Northern Bavaria and its mountain regions—at first changeable, heavy cloudiness, especially in the east; tomorrow partly cloudy, occasional showers or thunder storms; night-time cooling down to 12 to 8 degrees. Warming during the day to 20 to 24 degrees. In the mountain regions only to 15 degrees. Light to moderate northerly winds. The predictions for Bavaria until Friday evening—moderately unstable, however slightly warmer. You have heard the news. It is 5:08 p.m.

The same technique can be used for just about any other type of short unabridged language material, especially music. I have used it successfully with songs, even with such diverse pieces as Georg Danzer's "Sex Appeal," Nina Hagen's "Unbeschreiblich weiblich," Peter Schickele's, that is, P.D.Q. Bach's "Blaues Gras Cantata," as well as more traditional songs such as "Heidenröslein" and "Jäger aus Kurpfalz." What is important here is to determine what it is you wish students to listen to, delete it from the written transcript (if one is used at all!), and have students fill it in. The music, the voice of the singer, the rhythm and phrasing of the song, and so on, will normally help make the text come alive in a way that simply reading it, silently or aloud, will not accomplish.

Films and Television Programs

Feature-length films cannot normally be shown in class, even if they are available otherwise. When they are available, students should be encouraged to view them. For listening comprehension purposes any film is good, even if it is not a box-office hit! Most students who go to foreign-language films say that although they cannot completely follow the film without reading the subtitles, they can pick out sounds and sound patterns, familiar words and phrases, and they understand the overall "gist" of what is going on. Sometimes there is an unexpected pedagogical dividend for the teacher when the students see a foreign-language film. After viewing Schloendorff's *Der junge Törleß*, one student remarked that she remembered that one character said *Das ist unmöglich* (That's impossible) several times during the film. The phrase was one that I had used in class several times!

Laboratory Tapes

Language laboratory tapes are readily available and serve useful functions when it comes time for

students to practice very specific aspects of the language. However, they are at best a supplement to learning and acquisition, not a central feature of it. The reasons for this are clear. Most commercially produced lab tapes are made in sound studios. As a result, they have no background noises, no echo, no "depth." In addition, most commercial studio speakers use a very slow, precise cadence, with few interruptions, contractions, or hesitations. For oral practice of new material at the beginning stages this may be all to the good, since students are expected to repeat verbatim what is said or make minimal changes in the particular message. Because of varying degrees of technical playback quality in most language laboratories, it is also necessary not to allow, let alone insert, extraneous noises.

However, it is safe to say that students often find language lab tapes inappropriate, even ridiculous. Take, for example, the following scenario. Walter, a man in his fifties, is interested in living with Ingrid, a woman one would judge to be about 30. She sounds suspiciously like her mother, Frau Fischer, a woman who would have to be at least in her late 40's. Perhaps Frau Fischer is secretly interested in Walter herself, a man no doubt the age of her husband, about whom we learn practically nothing. There are two other characters in the scenario, Günther, who is Walter's friend, and Petra, who is Ingrid's friend, both about 30 years old. Notice that all of these suspicions and impressions are gained from listening to the tape, not from reading the textbook. For, lo and behold, when you do read the textbook you discover that Petra and Ingrid and Günther and Walter are all German university students. Frau Fischer is the only one who is not a student. It is rare to find a university student in a German-speaking country who is over 30 and almost inconceivable to find one who is over 50. But that is how this sample of German students sounded on commercially produced tapes, namely, like "old folks" or the teacher, whoever is younger!

I am not criticizing commercially produced tape material as a means of improving listening comprehension skill in general. I am simply pointing out that some are extremely limited in their ability to help students to listen to the language tridimensionally. Students need more than standard tapes.

Conclusion

There has been a substantial amount of research done on the nature of listening comprehension, both generally⁸ and with reference to second

0162-5

language learning.⁹ Although it is not possible to review it here, it should be clear that, like reading, listening cannot be learned without reference to other language skills or without regard for the experiences which learners gather from exposure to it. Meaningful listening experiences can be produced spontaneously and with little technical sophistication on the part of the teacher. Yet, if guided properly, these experiences will yield considerable dividends both in short-term acquisition, in long-term retention, and in enjoyment of language.

NOTES

¹Dividing language into three parts is a widespread activity. Structural linguists have phonology, morphosyntax, and semantics. Psychologists divide language into "lexical" elements (including pronunciation and spelling conventions), "semantic/syntactic" elements (i.e. grammar), and "content/conceptual" elements. For further information see Susan Campanini, "Learning Characteristics of the Disadvantaged: Implications for CAI Lesson Design (Helpful Hints for Computers and Other Teachers)," *Studies in Language Learning*, 3 (1981), 214-25. Information processing theory sees language as an exchange of information at the "statistical" level (physical representation of a signal, i.e. phonemes or graphemes), "semantic" level (the processes of encoding/decoding signals correctly), and "pragmatic" level (what happens to the recipient of the signal). This is described in Klaus Weltner, *The Measurement of Verbal Information in Psychology and Education* (New York: Springer Verlag, 1973), p. 1.

²Wilga Rivers, "Linguistic and Psychological Factors in Speech Perception and Their Implication for Teaching Materials," 123-24, in *The Psychology of Second Language Learning. Papers from the Second International Congress on Applied Linguistics*, ed. Paul Pimsleur and Terence Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971).

³Stephen D. Krashen, "Relating Theory and Practice in Adult Second Language Learning Acquisition," in *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* (New York: Pergamon, 1981), p. 101.

⁴For an explanation of the placement of *nicht* in German on the basis of overall sentence meaning, see Gerhard Helbig and Joachim Buscha, *Deutsche Grammatik. Ein Handbuch für den Ausländerunterricht* (Leipzig: VEB Verlag Enzyklopädie, 1979), p. 448. It is also discussed in their *Kurze Grammatik für Ausländer* (Leipzig: VEB Verlag Enzyklopädie, 1980), pp. 195-97.

⁵See Gail Guntermann, "Learning Outcomes in the Language Classroom," in *Action for the '80s: A Political, Professional, and Public Program for Foreign Language Education*, ed. June K. Phillips (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Company, 1981), p. 116; and Gail Guntermann and June K. Phillips, *Functional-Notional Concepts: Adapting the FL Textbook* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982), p. 29.

⁶Inter Naciones; Kultureller Tonbanddienst; Kennedyallee 91-101; D 5300 Bonn-Bad Godesberg; West Germany.

⁷(German text of the weather report):

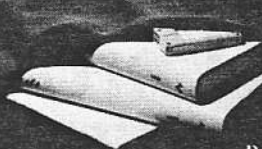
Der Wetterbericht, ausgegeben um 16 Uhr. Die Vorhersage bis morgen abend. Südbayern und Donaugebiet mit bayrischem Wald: Teils aufgeheitert, teils stärker bewölkt und vor allem nachmittags örtlich Schauer oder Gewitter. Tiefstwerte in der kommenden Nacht 8 bis 13 Grad. Tageshöchsttemperaturen morgen 18 bis 22 Grad. In den Alpen in 2000 Meter um 5 Grad. Gipfel vielfach in Wolken. Schwacher, zeitweise mässiger Wind aus Nordwest bis Nordost. Nordbayern mit seinen Mittelgebirgen: Zunächst veränderliche, im Osten überwiegend starke Bewölkung. Morgen teils heiter, teils wolkig, vereinzelt Schauer oder Gewitter. Nächtliche Abkühlung auf 12 bis 8 Grad. Tageserwärmung auf 20 bis 24 Grad. In den Mittelgebirgen auf etwas über 15 Grad. Schwacher bis mässiger nördlicher Wind. Die weiteren Aussichten für Bayern bis Freitag abend. Leicht unbeständig, jedoch noch geringfügig wärmer. Sie hörten Nachrichten. Es ist 17 Uhr und 8 Minuten.

⁸Sam Duker, ed., *Listening: Readings* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1971).

⁹Wilga M. Rivers, Kathleen Mitchell Dell'Orto, and Vincent J. Dell'Orto, *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of German* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 57-103.

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