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### Abstract

Teaching listening comprehension is central to all foreign language study programs. However, teaching listening in the classroom is insufficient. It is essential that language instructors train students in how to listen by teaching listening strategies. By incorporating metacognitive, affective, and social learning strategies into listening comprehension classrooms, instructors enable students to develop as independent language learners and to maximize opportunities for the development of listening comprehension in language learning.

### 概要

リスニング教育は、すべての外国語教育プログラムの要だ。しかし、ただ単に教室内でリスニング教育を行うだけでは不十分である。語学講師は生徒たちにリスニングストラテジーを伝授し、「リスニングの方法」を学ばせなくてはいけない。メタ認知ストラテジー、情緒的ストラテジー、そして社会的ストラテジーを授業の中にうまく組み込むことで、講師は生徒たちを自立した語学学習者に育て、リスニング力発達の機会を最大化することができる。

**Keywords:** Listening Comprehension, Strategy Instruction, ESL, Language Learning

### Listening Strategies Overview

The listening comprehension component of language acquisition is central to every foreign language program. Whether studying to attend a foreign university, for travelling, or simply to communicate through conversation, listening is a central component. Many aspects of listening comprehension have been studied over the past few decades, including a vast number of methodologies and reasons for listening, ways of teaching listening comprehension, and linguistic processing, among others. However, the single most important aspect of teaching listening comprehension is the teaching of *listening strategies*. Listening strategies train foreign language students in *how* to listen. Until fairly recently, the teaching of listening

comprehension was misunderstood; it was popular to think that normal spoken language was simply a faster version of what was taught in the classroom. Auditory supplements to curricula were often recorded in what is called “slow colloquial.” Dr. Gillian Brown decries this as a fundamental misconception of language teaching:

It implies that normal, conversational speech is exactly like slow colloquial only spoken faster. So anybody who can follow slow colloquial speech might simply expect to speed up a bit in order to understand normal conversational speech. [...] It suggests that there will be a more formal, more explicit, hence more understandable style of speech which one would expect to find in formal situations like lectures. (2)

Research has long shown that this is not the case. Therefore, the response has been to develop ways in which students may be taught to cope with the inconsistencies and variations of real, normal spoken language. The result has been a plethora of listening strategies used for all manner of different reasons and circumstances to improve listening comprehension. Moreover, by learning listening strategies, students develop the ability to become more autonomous learners. Once they have established methods for accurate listening, they can begin to practice outside of the classroom. Consequently, every auditory signal in the target language becomes a potential target for practice.

Teaching effective strategy use is central to the L 2 listening comprehension classroom, because building comprehension in specific *types* of listening is essential. Patricia Dunkel, a top researcher for second-language studies, notes that “communication scholars have begun to recognize the critical role listening skills play in the effective functioning of an individual in academic environments and business organizations” (“Listening” 434). Researcher Carine Feyton concurs, and notes the importance that the role of listening comprehension has acquired by arguing that “[t]he most innovative methods of language teaching that have emerged in the last decade [...] all share one common goal: communicative competence. [Among these] the priority of listening over speaking or the importance given to listening comprehension is a common denominator” (175). Moreover, it has also been remarked that listening comprehension plays a critical role in *overall* L 2 acquisition (Dunkel “Listening” 434). Given the centrality of listening abilities in L 2 learning, it should be noted that although there are very many factors that influence listening comprehension, the use of strategies is a key element, because strategies teach students *how* to listen more effectively. With practice and attention, students will become better listeners in the L 2. Essentially, competent listeners should be able to piece together words, pick up paralinguistic cues, differentiate between words, compensate for missing elements, and understand register and cultural significance in the intention of the speaker. Listening strategies help ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students accomplish these things.

Strategy-based instruction is used to teach students *how* to listen. Moreover, students must learn how to cope with situations in which some or all of the spoken language is less than comprehensible. This is done by using the strategies learned in class. David Mendelsohn argues that the purpose of strategy-based instruction is to “make learners aware of how the language functions –i.e., developing metalinguistic awareness, and second, [to make] them aware of the strategies that they use” (Guide 134). This is what he calls “metastrategic awareness” (134).

The overall goal of a strategy-based curriculum is to make the learners into successful, autonomous listeners. This type of instruction helps students use the information available to them to make sense of spoken language. They learn to pick up key words and phrases, recognize types of intonation, and learn how to look for paralinguistic signals and discourse markers that will help them to make sense of the language. Moreover, these skills can be used by students to “predict, guess, and infer” what they need to know about language (134).

There are several major benefits to using a strategy-based approach in teaching listening comprehension. As noted by Anna Chamot, students who learn strategies and use them often become overall better learners (71). In addition, many researchers, including Mendelsohn and Rubin, have noted that by making students aware of how to listen, they become better listeners because they begin to think about language on a conscious level. They become aware of how they are processing incoming data, and therefore make better sense of it. Furthermore, Mendelsohn notes that strategy-using students, because they are more aware of the listening process, are more mentally active. Strategy use requires students to become active participants in the learning process, and this has been shown to improve the effectiveness of the learners. Most importantly, “[s]trategies are [...] important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence” (Oxford 1).

### **Metacognitive Strategies**

Among the many strategies available to students, probably the most important is metacognitive. Rebecca Oxford, a well-known researcher on language strategy use, refers to metacognitive strategies as “actions which go beyond the purely cognitive devices, and which provide a way for learners to coordinate their own learning process” (136). Metacognitive strategies include the ability of the student to focus on their needs and goals, the ability to arrange and plan their learning, and the ability to evaluate their own progress (152). Each of these is crucial in the development of metacognitive strategies, and each contributes to student autonomy in its own way.

The first aspect of metacognitive strategies centers on *focus*. The focus of the student should be on linking prior-knowledge with new principles. Students should be encouraged to make associations themselves, and infer rules about language, based on what they already know. This will help them to create complex networks of information that will increase their ability to remember what they have learned. Prior knowledge can be a very useful tool for students when they are trying to make sense of rapidly incoming linguistic data. Essentially, the student who is able to draw on prior knowledge has a significant advantage over the student who has no information from which to draw context for incoming data.

Another aspect of student focus involves what Rebecca Oxford calls “paying attention” (154). Clearly, in order to learn, students must pay attention. However, Oxford divides this concept into two distinct components which she calls “directed attention” and “selective attention” (154). Directed attention refers to deciding “generally or globally” to focus attention on the task at hand. The instructor can facilitate this by providing interesting classroom activities, reducing distractions, and reminding students to stay focused.

More specifically, “selective attention” refers to the focus of students on minute details of the task at hand. To make this possible, the instructor should provide activities which “require attention to specifics” (154). By directing students’ attention to subject-matter on both a very broad and a very minute scale, the instructor gives the students the ability to be flexible in their focus, and adjust to difficult situations which require versatility for comprehension.

The final element of student focus is the degree to which students focus on reception or production of spoken language. Both Oxford and Dunkel feel very strongly about allowing students to follow their (often) very natural inclination to delay speech production until they are comfortable with their level of understanding of linguistic input (Dunkel “Listening” 435). Oxford observes that “listening is more rapidly developed than speaking” (155), so students may wish to postpone production until it seems less threatening. Dunkel, in agreement, describes this by saying:

The goal of second/foreign language instruction remains the development of communicative competence and oral fluency. This goal is achieved by putting the horse (listening comprehension) ahead of the cart (oral production). (“Developing” 100).

The idea here is that oral proficiency will develop at its own pace if listening comprehension strategies are developed as a priority. There do not seem to be any detrimental effects of letting students delay oral production because often their silence is not absolute. This “silent period” may be total or partial, and may last only hours or weeks (Oxford 155). On the whole, students produce language in their own time, and instructors can view the silent period as a way to assist the students in the development of their listening comprehension skills.

The second important aspect of metacognitive strategies involves planning and organizing. Besides teaching students how to manage their time by developing “practical weekly schedules,” instructors should encourage students to keep a notebook containing an organized account of “new language expressions or structures and the contexts in which they were encountered, class assignments, goals and objectives, and strategies they have learned that work well” (156). Organization of ideas is very important for language learners, because they need to stay focused on current tasks, while having access to organized accumulated information.

However, even before the task of organization is realized, students must have clear goals and objectives of which they are constantly aware, and these things should be noted in the students’ language notebooks. “Goals” are what Oxford refers to as “long-range aims referring to the outcome of many months or even years” (157). Objectives are more short-term aims, and it is important for anyone learning a new skill to remember both where they are going and how they are planning to get there. Hierarchical organization of goals and objectives keeps students focused on their own education plans, and discourages distractions and diversions. Students’ goals for listening may be “to attain an advanced listening proficiency rating, to be an effective listener in occasional conversations with native speakers, to understand the language well enough for foreign travel, or to be able to hold a job that depends on skilled, in-depth listening,” (157) but regardless, students should have clear, well-defined reasons and expectations for listening. Organization and goal setting make this both possible and efficient.

The third, and likely most important, aspect of metacognitive strategies is monitoring and evaluation. Students must learn to monitor their errors, and evaluate both their specific and overall progress. Michael Rost, in his discussion of “self-instruction in listening” notes the importance of “situations in which a learner, with others or alone, is working without the direct control of the teacher” (234). Oxford provides a very succinct definition of this concept by noting, “This strategy does not center as much on using the language as it does on students’ conscious decisions to monitor –that is, notice and correct –their own errors” (161); this is an important aspect of metacognition. Only when the student accepts responsibility for progress is it possible to become an effective, autonomous language learner. The instructor provides the limited role of corrector and guide in the classroom, but when the student is able to provide the same conscious instruction outside of the classroom, it is possible to make great progress in the development of language skills, particularly listening skills. Developing a self-monitoring ability is considered to be extremely difficult, but checklists, diaries, self-rating questionnaires, and rating scales are all useful tools for self-evaluation. Additionally, Rost argues that self-monitoring students should be able to “select appropriate materials, [adapt] pre-recorded material for instruction, [plan] realistic goals, [and keep] records of materials used” (234).

Mendelsohn believes that such tools “require learners to describe their own abilities” (Guide 48). These tools must be closely monitored in lower-proficiency students because, apparently, they “lack the experiential basis for making realistic self-assessments” (48). Additionally, the very wording of questionnaires and such can be misleading to students. For example, students have a tendency to rate themselves higher on “can do” questions rather than “I have difficulty” questions, because “they [find] it harder to disagree with negatively worded statements than to agree with positively worded ones” (48). This is a caution for anyone who wishes to use such tools in a language classroom. Self-assessment and evaluation are important, but students must be taught this skill, and care must be taken even to the specifics of questionnaire wording, as such things can impact the students’ achievement of accurate self-evaluation.

## **Affective Strategies**

Affective strategies develop a student’s ability to cope with anxiety and self-esteem, and to utilize affective energy as a positive resource in the language-learning process. Emotion can be either a strong motivator or a powerful inhibitor. In order to direct their emotions positively and achieve their language-learning goals, students must learn to effectively utilize affective strategies. Many listening comprehension researchers such as Oxford, Mendelsohn, and Brown advocate a variety of strategies that reduce anxiety and promote relaxation. For example, progressive relaxation, a systematic tensing and relaxing of muscles, has been shown by biofeedback researchers to reduce tension and anxiety. Moreover, meditation and deep breathing techniques have long been known to facilitate mental stability and tranquility. All of these are advocated by researchers as being useful anxiety lowering tools.

Additionally, the use of music and laughter has been shown to reduce stress before a difficult language task (Oxford 164). The use of music refers back to Georgi Lozanov’s Suggestopedia Method. He advocated the use of baroque music but, as many have discovered, any music that is soothing to the student is acceptable,

whether it be Mozart or Anoushka Shankar. The point is that the composition should have a lowering effect on the students' affective filter (Krashen 30). Music has the ability to help students relax and feel comfortable in their environment. This is also the case with laughter. Oxford strongly encourages the use of laughter in the classroom, as she believes that "[l]aughter brings pleasure to the classroom [...] it can be stimulated by many kinds of classroom activities, [and] is part of a general atmosphere of enjoyment for students of all ages" (165). The elements of laughter and music often help students relax and study more effectively, and should be integrated into any ESL/EFL curriculum, if possible.

Another vital aspect of affective strategies is self-encouragement. The development of this ability can take a number of forms, from speaking and thinking positively about oneself, to taking risks intelligently, to rewarding oneself for accomplishment in the language classroom. A student's mentality makes all the difference between world and want. The expectations that they hold for themselves are very likely going to be realized. This is why it is important for students to create a positive self-image that is sustainable.

Probably the most important aspect of the affective domain is positive self-image. It is quite well known that expectations precede fulfillment. If a student believes that he/she is stupid and unteachable, he/she will undoubtedly succeed in fulfilling those expectations. Oxford makes the suggestion that students write positive things in a language journal that will remind them to stay positive. Some examples are "I understand a lot more of what is said to me now" and "I enjoy understanding in the new language" (165). Such written statements will remind students to stay positive, and will give them points of reference by which to determine progress. It may seem artificial at first, but by consciously maintaining a positive attitude, students are less likely to become discouraged, and will eventually develop a capacity to think positively about language learning without the conscious effort.

Being positive is important, but maintaining such an attitude requires that errors and other discouraging factors be minimized. The implication here is that students learn to take risks *wisely*. Reckless guessing in a language course will lead to the despair of being thought incompetent. This affective strategy "involves a conscious decision to take reasonable risks regardless of the possibility of making mistakes or encountering difficulties. Risk taking must be tempered by good judgment" (166). It requires the use of other affective strategies used in conjunction with metacognitive and social strategies that can be used to minimize the possibility of error. Of course there will be mistakes, but a deliberate, conscious effort that goes awry is a far cry from reckless abandon. Students who take risks wisely will be noted as good language learners, and if the instructor reinforces this behavior among students, it will doubtless be a great encouragement to them when they do err.

## **Social Strategies**

The final objective, and perhaps the most important, is the use of *social strategies*. Students must learn to utilize their social environment for language purposes. They must ask questions, including questions of clarification and verification, cooperate with other students, teachers, and speakers of the target language, and develop cultural and personal awareness of those to whom the language is spoken.

Asking questions of clarification “involves asking the more proficient speaker to slow down, paraphrase, repeat, explain, or otherwise clarify what he or she has said” (Oxford 169). This may seem like mere common sense, but ESL/EFL students, especially of certain cultural backgrounds may be simply unwilling to do it. Students must be taught that this strategy is necessary, yet easily learned. Joan Rubin, a leading researcher in listening comprehension, has observed that a modification of interaction between a speaker and listener (by conversation checks, expansions, repetition, and clarification) will facilitate comprehension more than a speaker’s modification of his/her language independently of the listener (215).

Granted there are both good and bad ways to ask for clarification, but a student simply needs to memorize minimal phrases and know when to use them. Examples of these would be “Would you repeat that, please?” and “I’m sorry, I don’t understand” and “Did you say *X*?” Learning these phrases will make students more comfortable with clarification requests, because they are polite and applicable in almost any situation. Verification requests can utilize the same phrases, but by definition are used to verify that a word or phrase has been correctly understood. By teaching students to maintain clarity in a spoken interaction, the students will become more comfortable with spoken language and more willing to participate.

The next aspect of social strategies involves interaction with peers and proficient users of the target language. Students must learn to work together with others to combine their strengths and eliminate language weaknesses. By working with other language learners on activities, games, and simulations, this is possible. Students may work at an aural jigsaw story, in which they each hear a single part of the story and then collaborate on determining characteristics of the story as a whole. This is only one example, but there are many other variations that allow students to disguise each other’s weaknesses and build upon each other’s strengths. In addition, cooperation with proficient users of the target language, whether native speakers or not, will improve listening proficiency. Not only is it helpful to have a proficient speaker with whom one is comfortable making mistakes, but it is very beneficial to have a proficient speaker who understands the cultural expectations as well as the listening needs of the lower-proficiency student. This type of aide also helps to develop an awareness of the behaviors and expectations of the target culture. This, in turn, allows the learners to “become aware of fluctuation in the thoughts and feelings of particular people who use the new language. Such awareness brings learners closer to the people they encounter, helps them understand more clearly what is communicated, and suggests what they say and do” (Oxford 173). This particular type of social strategy is perhaps the most useful, because it envelops every aspect of communication and cooperation in the learner’s experience, including the affective and metacognitive. Students become aware of themselves as communicators by watching for a reflection from their high-proficiency counterparts, and, assuming they have a worthy mentor, this boosts a student’s affective stability.

These strategies represent only the “indirect” strategies of listening comprehension as described by Oxford, Mendelsohn, and Rubin. They work in conjunction with the “direct” strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensation), and of course, there are many other very useful strategies, especially ones which are more specific to certain types of listening and for a variety of listening purposes. However, what has been shown here are just a few of the essential strategies that are necessary in every listening scenario. These could be called “bedrock strategies” because they make up the foundation required to develop other, more

specific comprehension skills (Mendelsohn "Teaching" 85). Based on the representations of strategy use for listening comprehension, it is important to note that "we do know that listening plays an active role in the language acquisition process, that a positive transfer takes place from listening to speaking, and that listening skill is drawn upon more heavily in the communicative approaches and proficiency approaches to language teaching than it is in other approaches." In fact, it has been shown that listening ability contributes to overall language proficiency more than any other factor (Feyton 179). It has been noted, repeatedly, that "strategy instruction can improve listening comprehension," (Mendelsohn "Teaching" 83) and by teaching strategies that improve listening comprehension and make students more autonomous learners we, as instructors, give students the opportunity to become proficient in their target language. David Mendelsohn further states that "activities need to be developed that convince students of the value of strategy instruction" (84). Students need to understand that strategy use is the key to efficient development in listening comprehension, and it is the instructor's job to convince them of the relevance of strategy use through an understanding of the principles described in this examination of listening comprehension instruction.

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