

*Listening Comprehension - the Crossroads  
of Language and Psychology*

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While there is general agreement that listening comprehension should figure more in language teaching programmes nowadays, there is considerable confusion about the nature and best method of teaching it. The large number of disciplines which feel listening comprehension belongs to them should be a warning to us of the complex nature of the subject. Language teachers claim it as part of their domain, since clearly they must teach their pupils to understand the foreign language before they can hope to get very far; psycholinguists claim it, because they say it involves an analysis of mental processes; linguists maintain that their insights are essential, since the main consideration in listening comprehension is a professional break-down of the language, with an eye to such things as surface and deep structure; child psychologists say there is so much to be learned from the way a child develops listening comprehension ability in its first language that their discipline must be consulted when looking for rounded answers to such a complex question. And the list could be extended.

In this short article we will look at listening comprehension first from the language teacher's point of view, noting some of the perennial problems, then from the viewpoint of the psychologist, concluding that listening comprehension is an obvious area where linguists and psycholinguists must keep their heads together if their theories are to be of practical value to the language teacher.

**1. Listening Comprehension and language teaching**

After a period of emphasis on speaking in the target foreign language, the pendulum has swung back in favour of listening. Articles with titles like, "Caution : talking may be dangerous to your linguistic health" (Gary and Gary, 1981), "Rapid Acquisition of a foreign language (German) by the avoidance of speaking" (Winitz and Reeds, 1973), or "Effects of delay in oral practice at the beginning of second language learning" (Postovsky, 1974) have helped check a

movement towards what many would see as an extreme position regarding the role of speaking in early language learning. The enthusiasms of functional/notional flag-fliers were one reason for the temporary neglect of such an obvious and common-sense language teaching practice as well-ordered and graded listening comprehension materials.

That may sound a little harshly partisan and perhaps needs elaborating. The speaker in a foreign language who asks the questions but cannot understand the answers is in bad case. The kind of typical exchanges given in the poorer type of functional textbooks illustrate this : foreign speakers without the basics of the language are encouraged to use highly idiomatic expressions which deceive the native-speaker listener into replying in equally idiomatic vein, to the consternation of the foreign speaker and the eventual embarrassment of both parties—the worst kind of language learning experience. Phrase books in the past at least had no pretensions to being anything but phrase books. Some functional courses offer a quick way to performance in a foreign language, but only cause disillusion and a sad waste of effort, since the time which should have been spent in acquiring a basic competence in the language has been ill-spent with poorly conceived and designed materials.

No one would deny the potential benefits to foreign language teaching from the insights of functional/notional syllabuses and a more communicative approach. An excellent survey of the position at the beginning of the decade was given in the presidential address of Herbert Hayes to the British Association for Language Teaching (Hayes, 1980). Language teachers who have kept their heads will be building gradually into their courses elements of the new ideas which seem sensible and workable.

Nor would it be true to say that all functional/notional courses are to the detriment of listening comprehension as a teaching tool : in examining precisely how native speakers use language to express themselves, the better functional/notional courses have turned up some excellent advanced-level listening material. And in general there has been an increase in the production of and interest in “live” listening materials.

No doubt the easy availability of cassette tape-recorders and video cassettes has made listening easier to teach. Any teacher who can tune in, with reasonable clarity, to a French or German station, or in our case here, to a Japanese or Mandarin Chinese station, can provide the class with a lively listening session. What each teacher can make of the raw script is up to individual ingenuity and experience. When the listening is associated with reading materials on the same topic, and leads into discussion, with the discussion being written up, an excellent all-round lesson can often be had.

That great invention, the pause button, should be a teacher's friend. Whereas in the early days of tape-recorders, play-back was usually hampered by screeching stops at start and finish, now the student can pause the tape when the meaning is running away from him. A straight exercise in transcribing a difficult piece of listening material is made so much easier by that pause button, and a very useful exercise it can be too, though not to be overdone, as it can become boring.

Many variations of gap-filling are possible, though this requires the teacher to have the transcript of the talk or play or conversation. The really organised teacher can have one or two of his advanced pupils doing the transcriptions for him, checking with each other's version until they have an accurate script. Another set can decide on the deletions for gap-filling and a third group can actually do the job of gap-filling. I admit this sounds a lot easier on paper than it is liable to work out in practice, since it puts heavy demands of planned preparation on the teacher, but some sort of scheme like this is not entirely utopian.

However, a lot has been written on possible exercises in listening comprehension already and we do not wish to repeat ideas that are readily available in books and articles. Rather, we can remind ourselves of some of the perennial problems of listening comprehension.

a) Grading. It is very time-consuming for the teacher to find listening materials which will both sustain interest and be consistently at the right level—ideally a shade above the comfortable level—of the pupils.

b) Speed. On the one hand, artificially slowed-down material changes the whole nature of some sounds and segments (as has often been pointed out), on the other hand it is ridiculous to give beginners full-speed native delivery (as has not often enough been pointed out, though it seems so obvious.) Granted, at some stage the transition must be made to native-speaker speed, otherwise the foreign listener will never learn to tune in, but the analogy given from first-language learning—the child, it is said, hears a barrage of full-speed speech and learns to separate out the bits—this analogy is only one side to the story : the child also has a mass of slowly articulated speech being presented to him in his learning.

c) Different accents and registers. Do these matters belong to the higher flights of language learning or should the listening material contain from the start varieties in such things as accent and register?

d) Props. How much information and vocabulary should we feed to the pupil before listening, or after the first listening to a passage, and how much should we let him or her guess?

e) Authenticity. How much should the tape-script be doctored, or should we leave in all the ums and aws? On the one hand, these and other redundancies of real language are not just mental sloppiness on the part of the speaker, but are

part of nature's way of saving our comprehension circuits from being blown, with too concentrated input; on the other hand, for beginners, normal redundancy-packed language is probably too difficult, and at the other end of the scale, for advanced learners, needing the language perhaps for university work, normal redundancy-packed language would not be typical of the more carefully chosen, cleanly groomed language they might hear in some lecture situations.

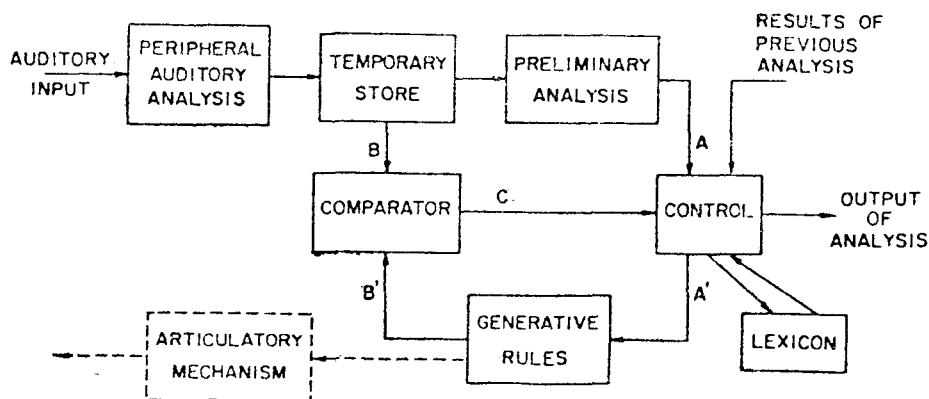
## 2. What is happening in Listening Comprehension ?

Less than ten years ago, despite much attention having been given to the problem, a standard book on the psychology of language summed up the situation on listening comprehension by saying that "almost every aspect of sentence recognition remains unsettled." (Fodor, Bever, and Garrett, 1974, p. 373). In another attempt to analyse the process of listening comprehension Quinn and Wheeler (1975) put forward a deliberately simple model which apart from the extraneous factors of motivation, attention, background knowledge and expectations, schematised the process as: Auditory Input → PROCESSING MECHANISMS → Comprehension. They say;

*"In our model, we deliberately enclose the 'Processing Mechanisms' in a black box, in order to highlight the fact that we are dealing with a system about whose detailed methods we know little."* (p. 9) And later:

*"In language learning, when we speak of a 'learning organism', we are speaking of a human student, a complex personality with a mind whose functioning remains largely a matter of mystery. And when we speak of listening comprehension, we are speaking of a vastly complex mental process about which we have very little certain or detailed knowledge."* (p. 10).

Others have proposed more complex models. Below, for example, is an Analysis-by-synthesis model proposed by Stevens (1979). Stevens, in describing his model, says :



*“The heart of the model is the control component, which directs the operation of the system. (It) makes a hypothesis concerning the representation of the utterance in terms of phonetic segments and features. This hypothesised representation forms the input to a set of generative rules, which determine certain relevant attributes that the signal would possess if it had this phonetic representation. These attributes are compared (in the comparator) with the attributes of the analysed signal residing in temporary store, and the comparator provides to the control component an indication of the degree of match.”* (Stevens, p. 51).

Without giving much fuller quotation, it would be unfair to criticise this model. Stevens himself points out “several inadequacies and unanswered questions” in the theory. His model is at least an intelligent attempt to put into words a nebulous concept.

One of the best attempts to analyse the listening comprehension process comes in Rivers (1976). She distinguishes three stages :

*“The first stage, sometimes called ‘sensing’ is a stage of rapid impressions, only roughly identified and differentiated and is relatively passive and receptive.... The second stage is one of identification through segmentation and grouping.... (leading to) the third stage, that of rehearsal and recoding of the material, which must take place before what we have perceived enters into long-term storage.”* (Rivers, pp. 134-6).

The full text must be read of course to get some appreciation of Rivers’ description of the comprehension process. In particular, it must be noted that she emphasises : “The three stages in speech perception which have been described form in practice one complex operation.” (p. 138) Also, she admits, along with most other researchers into this question :

*“the development of an adequate model of comprehension must, however, await more substantial knowledge of the actual processes involved from the psychological point of view.”* (p. 136)

Fortunately, this uncertainty at the level of psychological research and theorising has not stopped the tape-recorders turning and the video-cassettes being slotted in for viewing. Common sense must never be allowed to be awed by research terminology. Good teachers of experience know roughly the problems for their pupils in listening comprehension, even if they have not analysed these problems in scientific terms.

Moreover, the fascination which the psychological processes hold for some people should not blind us to the large part played in listening comprehension by

sheer competence in the language, that is, knowing what the words mean, familiarity with the structural bones of the language. An analogy could be offered from the medical profession: doctors who may well have to diagnose complicated psychosomatic illnesses, begin their medical training with a course in anatomy. In the last chapter of their excellent book on language comprehension, Freedle and Carroll caution:

*“Little has been said in these papers regarding the role of language competence in language understanding. Most of the contributors have taken for granted that the hearer or reader is, in fact, a mature speaker and reader of the language, and thus is endowed with the basic knowledge of the language, which enables him to understand anything said or written in it. Such an assumption is obviously faulty, for many reasons.”* (Freedle and Carroll, p. 359-60).

### Conclusion

Among the many factors entering into the listening comprehension process, two large groups are obviously of crucial importance, namely those factors associated with language competence, language proficiency, and those factors associated with psychological processes like reasoning, remembering, inferring, predicting and so on. We have suggested that an over-emphasis on verbal communication too early on in a teaching programme can be detrimental to the long-term improvement of the learner's language ability. While accepting that more listening programmes should be incorporated into the syllabus, we have noted some of the perennial difficulties of teaching listening comprehension in an ordered manner. We have looked briefly at a few suggestions and models which try to analyse the listening process and have noted that often the heart of the explanation is reduced to a mysterious “control box”, or “some wondrous mechanism (which we might dub Merlin)” (Gough, 1979, p. 341). Because of the importance of listening comprehension on the one hand, and because of the difficulties of teaching and confusion in analysing it on the other, this is clearly an area where the linguist and the psychologist must get together and help each other understand better a complex process. This is well summed up by Wilga Rivers:

*Listening comprehension is an area in which linguistic and psychological factors are inextricably interwoven and as a phenomenon it can never be explained purely from the point of view of the psychologist or of the linguist. Insofar as it is a performance phenomenon it can be investigated empirically as behaviour (behaviour involving two persons), but such investigation*

*will be peripheral unless it takes into account what the linguist has to say about competence and the organisation of the language system.*" (Rivers, 1976, p. 133.)

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