The Nature of Listening:
The need for listening in English for Academic Purposes

Tricia McErlain
C.E.S. Ramón Carande

The teaching of listening skills has long been an accepted classroom activity in the General English classroom. Language teaching in the Faculty, however, has tended to lag behind in this respect and to concentrate on reading and writing skills at the expense of aural skills. We would argue, however, that listening skills, in these days of University exchange programmes requiring students to cope with English as a medium of instruction during their University career and with a European, as opposed to a national, job market, should form an integral part of any University English programme. Like it or not, we are now dealing with a student population accustomed to audio-visual input, not merely in the language classroom, but in a number of disciplines This paper seeks to examine recent g on the subject of listening and to apply this to the Higher Education classroom.

In the case of overseas' students[1] at British Universities, the psychological and pedagogical reasons for understanding spoken English need hardly be stressed. However, given the European Community's continuing commitment to exchange programmes, with the introduction of the *Socrates* Programme, European students are attending courses in British Universities in increasing numbers, and exchange visits, via *Erasmus* and other organisations, are taking place throughout Europe, frequently employing English as the *lingua_franca* of the programme.

However, due to constraints of numbers and resources, 'EAP[2] programmes taught as integral components of degree programmes at Spanish Universities tend to prioritise reading skills, owing to the hegemony of English language publications in most disciplines and the pressing need for students to understand bibliography in English. Nevertheless, audio-visual resources are increasingly available and the integration of listening skills into the language programme is now a real possibility. The reasons for so doing are manifold.

Some authors argue that students should have a command of an international language and should, with a minimum of effort, be able to acquire a receptive knowledge of several tertiary languages. Krashen's notion of the silent period, during which the learner receives *contextualised input* and is not expected to speak unless he/she wishes to do so, and the mentalists' belief in *acquisition* rather than *learning* tend to support the view that the teaching of listening is beneficial to the language learning process in general. Krashen

---

[1] The term 'overseas student' in UK refers to non-European students.

[2] We use the term *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP) as a generic one to include the variety of specialist English courses taught in Higher Education.

(1976: 25) emphasises the long-term value of acquisition. According to his model, acquisition takes place as a matter of course, providing certain conditions are met. *Input is* of prime importance and the greater the exposure to the target language, the more promptly will the learner acquire its grammar. Emphasis is placed on the *contextualisation* of language, i.e. the need for the language to which the learner is exposed to he comprehensible and the need for meaning to he gleaned from context. Motivation also plays an important role in Krashen's theories as the *meaning* which the *code* carries should he of interest to the learner, if acquisition is to take place. As what Krashen (1976) refers to as *the affective filter* can provide a harrier to learning, motivating, relevant materials are of the essence.

Given the present generation of students' demand for and familiarity with a variety of learning media, the use of audio-visual materials in any language programme must be considered motivating. Objections hitherto heard, within traditional university environments, to the introduction of videos to the lecture theatre, are scarcely murmured nowadays as the multi-media approach to learning is becoming commonplace across a range of disciplines. Video also provides *contextualised* learning, as the paralinguistic gestures and facial expressions aid comprehension. The British 'Open University' lecture programmes, for example, provide a variety of audio-visual aids, in the form of diagrams, charts, etc., as well as concrete referents, such as whisky, tobacco and other highly taxable items to explain various fiscal options open to government. Given the fact that the listening materials used may employ similar lexical items as those found in the reading materials accompanying them, listening materials can reinforce the learning process when skills are taught in an integrated fashion.

Duffy (1977: 262) maintains that oral language comprehension is a crucial pre-requisite for reading comprehension. Tests have shown that learners lacking auditory discrimination are also poor readers (Byme & Shervania, 1977). Forrest (1980) also maintains that the carry-over from listening to speaking and writing is greater than that from reading to speaking and writing, again showing that listening comprehension benefits the student's other language skills. Listening is an important medium of information-gathering in our society, and listening skills, while important during the student's university career, are also needed throughout his/her professional life.

In the context of EAP, the listening skills required in a strictly academic sense are those needed for listening to lectures, but the use of the media is also of potential academic interest as news broadcasts, documentaries and, as mentioned earlier, distance learning packages are all potentially valuable learning aids.

Having discussed the reasons for listening, it may be considered worthwhile, at the risk of putting the cart firmly after the horse, to examine the nature of listening. Listening is often erroneously considered a passive skill. In fact, in order to decode the message that the speaker is delivering, the listener must actively contribute knowledge from both linguistic and non-linguistic sources. This view of listening would involve the learner in listening to the message, without paying attention to its component elements. Listening to a language can he defined as the ability to receive and decode oral communication by processing a language sample. Listening is a two-way process, involving reception, or the decoding of input, and production, involving predicting and compensating.

According to McKeating (1981), the listener passes through certain processes in constructing a message out of a stream of sound in the Ll situation:

1. Perception
2. Decoding
3. Prediction and selection—the prediction of select items, accompanied by selective listening with a specific purpose in mind.

Perception of sounds refers to the process of identifying speech sounds. The listener uses linguistic knowledge to identify these and makes sense of the sounds to which she is exposed by segmenting them into familiar units, recognising and using intonation to indicate word boundaries. Thus the learner is able to segment the flow of speech into meaningful parts.

Decoding refers to the means by which the listener makes sense of the message by taking in chunks and not just sentences. This has implications for the teacher training the student to listen, not only for key words, but also for chunks of meaning. Each chunk should be recognised as meaningful and understood on reception and held in short term memory long enough for it to he related to what has gone before or what follows.

Out of this process come pieces of information which can he stored in the long-term memory for later recall. The process depends on recognising lexical meaning, perceiving grammatical relationships signalled by word order, tense markers, structure words, cohesive devices, etc.

Speech perception and decoding do not proceed piecemeal, but form an integrative process. One cannot interpret speech at one level, without simultaneous knowledge on other levels. Perception requires understanding at the phrase level, as is evidenced by the experiments of Brever et al. (in Slobin, 1979: 38).

Prediction of specific items with a high degree of accuracy helps the listener to listen without straining to catch every word. The prediction of unknown or unheard words reduces tension in the listener. Redundancy also helps the listener and has a role to play in ensuring the message is received. Selection refers to the process of sifting information and retrieving relevant information in a mass of data.

Oller (1974: 24) uses the term *expectancy* to describe the fact that cognitive processes are dependent to a great extent on the human capacity to anticipate elements in the sequence of experience. This insight goes back to a series of experiments (Oller, 1972) which showed that the more predictable a series of elements becomes, the more readily it is processed. This *expectancy* grammar characterises any form of comprehension. Brown (1978) concentrates on the understanding of spoken language. According to Dirven (1977), it is an almost impossible task to listen to excerpts of spontaneous speech and then to answer a series of content questions. What the listener should do is to use all possible cues to predict the factual content of the communication and its interactional structuring. Labov's semantic-pragmatic interpretation model was developed in the course of analysis of therapeutic discourse. The model claims to have validity for all types of face-to-face interaction and is thus of relevance to the question of listening skills. According to Labov, the highest linguistic unit is the speech event, comprising the following:

1. The actually spoken text.
2. The paralinguistic clues, revealed through such vocal elements as tenseness, hesitations, etc.
3. The common knowledge shared by speaker and hearer, including propositions deriving from earlier discourses or parts of the present discourse (Labov & Fanshell, 1977).

Halliday and Hasan (1976: 31) also distinguish between the use of language which is *context bound* and that which is less so, the latter being characterised by exophoric reference, or reference to a shared world knowledge which is taken for granted in the conversation and not particularly referred to by the speaker. According to these writers, children's language is characterised by exophoric reference.

Of course, Labov and Fanshell (1977) are analysing the speech event from the point of view of the interpreting observer and are concerned with a model for therapy. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the paralinguistic messages which are passed from client to therapist have obvious implications for the teaching of listening skills. The question is raised concerning the extent to which listening is a purely auditory experience and the extent to which it is a visual one. It also raises the question of the shared world knowledge between the speaker and the listener and the degree to which this aids comprehension. From the point of view of our own teaching situation, the findings concerning the paralinguistic elements of listening have obvious implications for the type of listening media employed.

If we are to contextualise input, to allow for the *context bound* nature of language, to increase motivation and allow input to he comprehensible, by incorporating paralinguistic gestures, and generally take into account the fact that listening is not a purely auditory experience, we must inevitably employ a medium which incorporates the visual aspects of listening. This is, of course, easier said than done. The use of video, while it has several advantages, particularly when dealing with large groups of students, also has a series of disadvantages for those of us teaching in Higher Education. Firstly, as we pointed out at the beginning of this paper, reading has a high priority on the syllabus and, while audio tapes allow students to read and listen at the same time, videos, for the very reasons we find them useful in aiding comprehension, require our whole attention. Listening and note-taking skills, a prime objective of academic listening courses, can better be taught by using taped audio lectures. Moreover, the difficulty of finding suitable materials available in video is also a problem.

Having found video materials relevant to the discipline, the question then is how to exploit them in such a way as to provide useful learning material. While listening and reading simultaneously is not an option when using videos, the exploitation of the script as part of a pre-listening exercise provides useful reading practice. While there exists the difficulty of offering reading material employing spoken language and vice versa (in the case of taped lectures employing formal English), students bring to the listening task a shared knowledge of the discipline. Their familiarity with the concepts under discussion facilitate comprehension and boost confidence. It is useful to employ materials from areas of the discipline with which students are already familiar. Our express aim, after all, is not to

teach Business Studies, Economics etc, but rather to enable students to understand the language employed in these disciplines.

The pre-task reading exercise breaks the rules regarding 'listening first'. However, this is more than compensated for by the students' increased interest in the task. Reading explanation-listening may be followed by repeated listening, at the end of which students arrive at a degree of understanding which motivates them greatly. Clearly, the task of providing the complete written text of the video is a daunting one for the teacher. Nevertheless, materials from a variety of disciplines are available commercially from the Open University, for example, which provide supplementary written materials with the video lecture. Such materials, moreover, provide a readily available introductory course to the discipline, invaluable for the EAP teacher who, in the context of British Universities at least, may be teaching students from a wide variety of unfamiliar disciplines. Nobody can seriously expect the ESP teacher to be an expert in the particular discipline, but it is only common sense to want to have an equal understanding of basic concepts and to provide appropriate materials which can he taught in an integrated fashion to enhance motivation and facilitate learning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Halliday M. A. K. & R. Hasan (1976). *Cohesion in English.* Longman: London.

Krashen S. D. (1976). "Formal and informal linguistic environments in language acquisition and language learning." *TESOL Quarterly* 10,2: 157-168.

Labov, W. & D. Fanshell (1977). *Therapeutic Discourse: Psycho-therapy as Conversation.* New York: Academic Press.

McKeating, D. (1981). "Comprehension and listening" in G. Abbot & P. Wingard (eds.), *The Teaching of English as an International Language.* Collins.

Oller, D. (1974). "Toward a theory of phonological process in first and second language learning." Paper presented at the Western Conference of Linguistics, Seattle, Washington

Oller, J. (1978). "Expectancy for successive elements: key ingredients to language use." *Foreign Language Annals* 7: 443-452.

Slobin, D. (1979). *Psycho-linguistics*, 2nd ed. Illinois: Scott, Foreman & Co.