

A FEW KEY FEATURES OF DEVELOPING LISTENING AS AN INTEGRATED SKILL

Dimitrie Andrei Borcan
PhD "Ovidius" University of Constanța

Abstract: *The present study approaches listening as an integrated skill and the issues its developing raises during teaching, as viewed by a number of methodology writers, among whom Penny Ur, Jeremy Harmer, Jim Scrivener, Adriana Vizental, and including a few personal opinions of the author. It insists on the differences in opinions between various methodologists, regarding the observing of either a single listening (as in real life) or at least two listenings (as in class work, for two different teaching purposes), and on the issue of the appropriate speech speed as a condition of intelligibility. It shows that, although in real life, speech speed is generally fast, for teaching purposes it should vary for the sake of the text accessibility to the teenage students.*

Key words: *method, listening, redundancy, speed, intelligibility*

Penny Ur divides listening into extensive and intensive listening. According to Harmer, extensive listening is done outside the classroom, on MP3s, on the radio. Students can create journals, fill in report forms on this type of listening. (Harmer 304).

Intensive listening is done in the classroom by using audio material. It has certain advantages: there are several voices; players are portable and cheap; many coursebooks include CDs. However, it has also disadvantages, such as the poor acoustics of big classrooms.

In her chapter "Teaching Listening," Penny Ur remarks that, in most situations, the listener is speaking, responding to what he is being said as well as listening, therefore listening is an integrated skill (Ur 105).

She defines the characteristics of real life listening situations (Ur 106-107) as:

1. The informality of spoken discourse, consisting in:
 - "brevity of chunks" (short chunks) (Ur 106);
 - pronunciation: the words are often slurred;
 - the vocabulary is colloquial, informal;
 - the frequent ungrammaticality of spoken language;
 - "noise" as the perception of bits of unintelligible conversation (106);

- redundancy, including repetition, paraphrase, “utterances in parenthesis” (106), fillers: “I mean,” “well”, “err”(106);

- non-repetition: unlike listening tests, the real life discourse is not “repeated verbatim, it is heard only once,” (106) which is compensated for by redundancy, or by the possibility of requesting explanations (Ur 106)

2. “Listener expectation and purpose” (107):

The listener has a purpose and an expectation to hear certain things relevant to his objective.

3. “Looking as well as listening” (107):

The listener has a visual stimulus beside the sonorous one: an object, a picture, a map, “the environment in general” (107).

4. “Ongoing, purposeful listener response”(107):

The listener usually responds at brief intervals, not only at the end of the spoken discourse.

5. “Speaker attention”(107):

The speaker generally attracts or changes the speaker’s discourse, by his verbal or non-verbal reactions, and hereby he changes the discourse. (Ur 107).

Referring to “real life listening in the classroom” (107), she argues that “classroom listening is not real life listening” (107), the latter not being passages read aloud about which we answer with comprehension question-answer junks, an unnatural, artificial language function.

Providing some guidelines for teachers, Ur notes that listening texts are characterised by:

-informal talk;

-speaker visibility;

-a single exposure to the spoken text (which, therefore, needs to be redundant in order to provide the information more than once) (Ur 108).

Ur contends that listening tasks involve:

-expectations: the listeners should have certain expectations about what they will hear, in order to “activate their relevant schemata” (108).

-purpose: a purpose of the listening should be established by setting a pre-task (e.g. marking something on a map, following some instructions).

-“ongoing listener response”(108) (“there are intermittent responses during the listening,”(108) not just a final one).

She concludes that real life listening is more motivating than artificial texts-with-questions. However, it has the disadvantage of a single exposure to the spoken text (Ur 109).

In his subchapter “How do we listen?” Jim Scrivener remarks that we generally listen “top-down” i.e. big picture ->detail, rather than “bottom up” i.e.detail ->big picture (Scrivener 257).

In top-down listening, we can predict certain words even before the playing starts, we use previous knowledge to hypothesize, we know the typical pattern some interactions follow, we do not start from scratch.

In bottom-up we listen carefully to find a certain word. Contrasting “top-down” to “bottom-up”

<u>Top-down</u>	<u>Bottom-up</u>	
1	6	The whole text
2	5	Longer sections of the text
3	4	Sentences
4	3	Clauses/chunks
5	2	Words
6	1	Sounds

When we listen, we constantly vary “top-down” and “bottom-up.” Many teachers believe that in real life we constantly use top-down. We actually do not use all the stages numbered above. (Scrivener 259)

Similarly, Adriana Vizental (2008) considers that:

“-listening/reading is [...] a process of extracting meaning;

-the receiver is not a passive recipient but actively interacts with the text [...] and contributes meaning to it;

-receptive skills do not act alone, but together with productive ones, as integrated skills” (Vizental 139) The listener/reader makes predictions, has expectations, he and the text are interactants (141).

Listening involves three sub-skills: hearing, understanding and responding (143) in an either non-linguistic way (by acting) or in a linguistic way (by taking notes, participating in a conversation, etc.)(144). Listening should always be taught integratively, together with speaking and writing (144). It means that all activities should be conceived as integrative, combining skills, as it happens in real life in a communicative situation.

Difficulties of Developing Listening as an Integrated Skill and Solutions

As quoted by Harmer, Penny Ur recommends a single hearing, like in real life. However, she herself admits that in real life we can ask for better comprehension and that students may want to listen several times for more details. If students are to benefit from this listening repetition, she agrees we must do it at least two times, the first for general comprehension, the second for detailed comprehension, text interpretation or language analysis. Agreeing to Ur's opinion, Harmer finds that the lead-in is more efficient when giving students background knowledge than when giving them vocabulary or preview questions. (Harmer 305)

Students control the stop and start. They have access to different machines (in small groups, this is done at the group's rhythm, better than at the whole class's rhythm). Students working in a language laboratory or in a listening centre can work in lockstep (at the same time), but it is more satisfactory if they work each at their own machine, at their own speed (Harmer 305).

Ur analyses some specific practical implications of implementing the single hearing: As advantages she notes that less recorded material means less expense and less risk of breakage.

As "problems or reservations" (Ur 109) she notes that many teachers are not self-confident of sounding native enough. Also, students listening only to their teacher do not benefit from a variety of voices and accents. The single listening does not provide enough exposure for doing more than one task, either the general comprehension or the specific scanning one. Her conclusion is that teachers should be "able to improvise" (109) for the listening task. Few can do it. They need the help of a picture/diagram. A wise compromise would be a double listening: the first for skimming, the second for scanning. (109)

Ur also notes implications regarding "listening tasks" (110), such as "expectations and purpose" (110). As advantages, she mentions providing students with an expectation of what they are going to do, by using a picture, a diagram, a map.

However, this involves problems or reservations: the natural response, speech, cannot be done concomitantly with listening. It has to be done later; the same holds true for written responses. Also, speech and information for listening comprehension come too much and too fast, if there is not enough redundancy. The result is the initial feeling of "frustration," of "failure," which "should be avoided" (110).

In conclusion, the teacher should check the information with a colleague: it should be feasible. He should avoid too many questions at the first task (110).

Regarding learners' problems, Ur notes:

1. Having “trouble catching the actual sounds” (111);
2. Students feel they should “understand every word” (111); otherwise they feel “worried and stressed” (111).
This is “unconsciously fostered by teachers” (111). Solution: students need not understand the whole text, but just the gist. Occasionally, they can scan it for just one or two words.
3. Students can understand people if they speak slowly and clearly; they cannot understand fast native speaking. However, they should be exposed to fast real-life talk. The solution and advantage of the talk done by the teacher is that it can be done more slowly at first, and then repeated at a faster speed.
4. Students “need to hear things more than once” (112) in order to understand. The solution is a redundant one-off listening of real life material, to compensate for lack of repetition.
5. Students cannot keep up with what they hear, cannot think ahead or predict. The solution is that they should be encouraged to pick up what they can understand and ignore the rest.
6. Students get tired with long listenings and cannot concentrate. The solution is that the teacher should get short chunks of listening (112).

Similarly, according to Scrivener, there are certain obstacles to understanding listening:

- People speak too fast;
- Listeners do not know when words start or end;
- They do not understand the pronunciation;
- They cannot work out the details;
- They do not get the general sense of the message. They do not catch the most important parts of what is said. (Scrivener 249)

With Scrivener, an unsatisfactory listening lesson involves:

- only one listening;
- difficulty with understanding questions;
- a severe attitude of the teacher (250).

Since students cannot get a general understanding (gist) and specific details at the same time, and, besides, they cannot write them down at a single listening, the teacher can help them with a tapescript. But then, this is no longer a listening lesson, it becomes a reading lesson.

To sum up: the activity should be realistic, not too difficult and threatening, it should involve listening developing, not reading.

A simple plan to do this is:

1. Set questions;
2. Play recording;
3. Check if the students have found the answers;
4. If not, play the recording again. (250)

When writing about choosing the right task, Scrivener mentions two purposes:

- To get a general overview of the main story or message;
- To catch specific details. (252)

The students must not be overburdened by the task. Besides, the task is artificial, since in real life, they will not listen to such conversations unless they are eavesdropping. Most people in real life are interactive rather than mere listeners, they ask for clarification and repetition, they see the speakers' facial expression and mouth motion. In real life students are not guided by questions about listening. (252)

Like Harmer, Scrivener writes about the task-feedback circle. It is snailshell-like, starting from easy tasks and moving to more difficult ones:

Lead-in (i.e. pre-listening introduction, discussion, looking at pictures) ->Pre-task(optional) work (i.e. looking through worksheets, work on vocabulary, prediction) ->Set clear task ->Play recording (for general understanding, not minute understanding)->Feedback on the task (not unfair questions!) ->Could they do the task? If Yes, -> Conclude. If No, -> Play recording again.

Go through the task-feedback circle 3-4 times, for information going from General/Big -> More detailed -> Language focus (grammar, vocabulary) i. e. from big to small (the same as "top-down") (Scrivener 253-254)

He proposes some guidelines for listening skills work in class:

- Keep the recording short (two minutes at the most);
- The recording must be played a reasonable number of times;
- The students must be allowed to discuss the answer in pairs;
- Do not immediately approve the right answers. Ask instead, "Do you agree?"(255);
- Do not let yourself be led by one strong student. Students must all understand;
- Use facial expression. Play the recording again, until all the students agree;
- Give the students help if they are completely stuck, the help should be in the form of another task;
- You may give the students control of the recording and let them do what they wish;

-Do not cheat the students by changing tasks halfway the activity;

-Do not let the students get discouraged. The task should be appropriate.(Scrivener 255)

He recommends grading the task, rather than recording it. Recording can be done with any level of the students, depending on the difficulty of tasks. Beginners will catch the names, whereas advanced students will discuss opinions.

He even proposes reordering mixed up stages in a listening lesson (Scrivener 256-7).

Conclusion

Listening is a challenging teaching method both as regards the difficulties of finding or adapting the correct materials, and as conceiving the exposure to the listened to text as a single one or as a double or even multiple one, on condition that then the respective exposure should be graded as either speed or as lexical content difficulty and it should serve a different teaching aim with every listening, generally starting from general comprehension and moving to finer understanding, such as picking up items or phrases for synonymity or rephrasing /paraphrasing or antonymity, and finally for finer literary interpretation or any other type of discussion originating from the listened to text.

Grading speech speed is of vital importance for the success or failure of the listening activities, as it can be intimidating and blocking if it is not appropriately chosen for beginners, but it can remain artificially slowed down, therefore inefficient unless it is gradually brought up to genuine, real life speech speed, and this is one of the most difficult tasks for a teacher to achieve processually, in time.

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