TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION: SOME IMPORTANT ASPECTS FOR MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHING TECHNIQUES

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Abstract

The paper discusses aspects of spoken language that should be considered in the development of teaching materials, and proposes a few techniques for teaching listening comprehension. It starts with an overview of important characteristics of spoken discourse, which include phonology, accents, prosodic features, speech rate, and discourse structure. It then argues that spoken input varies according to two major distinctions, namely CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) and BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and that efforts should be directed to the former if the materials are intended for academic purposes. It maintains that the materials should incorporate aspects of strategies for listening that help learners overcome comprehension barriers and gain the most from the spoken input. Some principal considerations in grading listening materials are presented according to five parameters, which include linguistic characteristics, explicitness, organization, content and context. Finally, the paper proposes a few teaching techniques that promote strategic listening comprehension for EFL learners of intermediate up to pre-advanced level in an academic setting.

Keywords: teaching, listening, strategies, material development

INTRODUCTION

Teaching listening can sometimes be a challenge for EFL teachers. Nishimaki (2014, p. 5) stated that spoken language exists only in fractions of seconds and therefore it may not be easy to capture its parts and direct the learners' attention to them in the same way as a reading lesson usually goes. Commonly, teachers just give some audio materials to be listened to and

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then go on with checking comprehension questions, something which is more of testing than teaching (Chen, 2013, p. 82; Field, 2002, p. 246).

Over years of experience, the writer has accumulated some techniques that can be considered for teaching listening comprehension. This paper consists of two parts, namely designing materials for listening comprehension, and applying some techniques that aim at raising awareness about strategies for getting the most out of a spoken discourse. A particular emphasis is given to what is called collaborative listening, a technique where learners share with one another their strategies for comprehending the spoken messages. The techniques are especially useful for general EFL classes of early intermediate up to post-intermediate or pre-advanced level.

Vandergrift (2007) and Hosseini (2013) argued that despite the central role listening comprehension plays in language learning, it is the least understood process and so far is the least investigated area. Osada (2004) called it a passive skill that learners will eventually master by themselves. As a result, many teachers often compile materials without helpful guidance for determining the complexity level of the spoken utterances, the suitability of the content, and the way the materials are organized. Teachers sometimes rely on their intuition and come up with a pile of materials that turn out to be either too difficult or too easy for the learners, or that are simply arranged unsystematically. Some teachers may incidentally manage to gather materials which are suitable and well-ordered for their classes, but still uncertain about what it is that makes their compilation good.

This paper aims to present parameters along which teachers can easily check whether their attempts in compiling have been on the right track. Prior to presenting the parameters, however, the paper discusses some important components of listening comprehension, the right domain of language use that listening materials should be oriented to, and the incorporation of listening strategies into the compilation.

Features of Spoken Discourse and
How They Benefit Teachers

Spoken discourse incorporates features that make it distinct from written ideas, and therefore demand different kinds of attention and concentration on the part of the learners. Spoken discourse is usually fleeting, delivered in rates between 140 to 210 words per minute, has shorter idea units connected by coordinators (and, but, or), and carries prosodic features like stress and intonation (Buck, 2001; Nishimaki, 2013). The foremost difference is its fleeting nature. While written ideas are printed

permanently, spoken discourse is basically ideas encoded in a stream of sounds which exist only once within a very short time before they are gone. The second important feature is the speech rates. According to Buck (2001, p. 39), speakers normally say three words within a second. Tauroza and Allison (1990) analyzed the speech rates of lectures to non-native speakers, radio broadcast, interviews, and conversations, and found that these have speech rates of 140, 160, 190, and 210 words per minute, respectively. Moreover, individual sounds often undergo modification when they are combined in speech. Coupled with speech rate, this factor poses a challenge for the learners. Other features, however, may provide them with contextual assistance. These are stress and intonation patterns, the features which Buck (2001, p. 5) stated as "one of the most important aspects of listening comprehension". Another helpful feature is redundancy, the presence of several linguistic elements that give clues to the listener about the intended meaning. Still, one indispensable element of listening comprehension is the discourse structure, which is defined as the ways a speaker arranges and marks the links between ideas in their speech in order to facilitate comprehension (Buck, 2001). The use of discourse markers, defined as words or phrases that signal relations between ideas, and the knowledge of typical structure of a speech may aid learners in their effort to get the messages.

Some studies have addressed the issue of difficulties in listening comprehension. Graham (2006) conducted a study which reveals the difficulties experienced by foreign language learners in listening comprehension. Two of the most difficult barriers she mentioned are speech rates and perception of individual sounds in a stream of utterances. The finding corroborates an earlier study by Hasan (2000), who stated that EFL learners typically experience several problems in their listening comprehension.

Thus, it makes sense to build a teaching strategy that aims to help learners overcome these obstacles.

Teachers can manipulate those above features of oral discourse to facilitate the learning of listening comprehension. They can use speech rate as a parameter for selecting materials that will suit their learners' current proficiency level. If they teach learners of different levels, they can easily grade their materials on the basis of speech rate, giving spoken materials at a slower speech rate for beginners and gradually choosing materials at faster speech rates for those at more advanced level.

To overcome the barrier of phonological modification, teachers may supply the learners with the transcript of the listening materials. The practice of listening while reading the transcript may help the learners establish correspondence between the sounds they hear and the printed versions they

read. In addition, they can mark on the script where the stresses fall and what intonation patterns are used. As they progress throughout the course, the teacher may gradually reduce the amount of help from the transcript. This can range from deleting some parts of the script to withdrawing the script completely, compelling the learners to rely on their auditory sense.

Gradually diminishing help can also take the form of various degree of redundancy of the spoken input. With beginning learners, the teacher can provide a maximum redundancy (by using repetition and paraphrase). The more clues are given around a central message, the easier it should be for the learners to perceive the message. Yet, this abundant supply of extra clues may not be natural in real-word listening tasks. Thus, it is the teachers' task to ensure that as the learners progress to a higher level, the redundancy level is reduced to a normal degree.

Finally, teachers can help the learners to become aware of rhetorical organization. Rhetorical organization, defined as the arrangement of ideas in a discourse, carries the concept of discourse markers, which comprise words and phrases that connect different ideas in a spoken material, such as "however", "in other words", and the like. They can introduce to the students the rhetorical pattern of a given listening material and the accompanying discourse markers prior to the actual listening. When engaged in the actual listening, the learners may activate their knowledge of the rhetorical pattern and notice the discourse markers to obtain as much information as possible from the spoken input.

BICS and CALP

Communication in the real world falls into two distinct categories and therefore requires different skills on the part of the learners. Cummins (1980) stated that the first is Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (henceforth BICS), while the second is Cognitive and Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Stern (1983) stated that while BICS hinges on creative use of language and communicative aspects, CALP emphasizes more on the cognitive capacity and conscious mastery of the formal aspects of language. The former encompasses non-academic situations, while the latter comprises discourse types and exchanges that are executed for academic purposes. This difference has an important bearing not only on the skills that the learners have to master but also on the selection of materials for listening comprehension lesson. Teachers must be certain in the first place whether they want to direct their lessons toward BICS or toward CALP. Spoken discourse under BICS category may revolve around topics of daily lives outside school. Spoken materials within CALP, in contrast, will cover

topics typical of academic life. Table 1 below displays some examples of communicative situations under each category:

TABLE 1
Communicative Situations under BICS and CALP

BICS	CALP
Talking about pastimes	Talking about study habits
Chatting among friends	Engaging in group discussion
Engaging in conversation	Having consultation with thesis advisor
Recounting personal experience	Listening to lecture

The distinction into the two categories calls for different decisions on the materials to be selected and the tasks to be assigned to the learners. With BICS-oriented lessons, teachers should ensure that the materials have incorporated elements that typically characterize spoken discourse in these situations. These may include an informal style of speaking, overlapping speech by the interlocutors, the use of colloquial and idiomatic expressions, and frequent use of fillers (such as "um…", "you know") (Lam, 2002, p. 251). Accordingly, tasks for the learners should be as similar as possible to the kinds of responses that speakers normally give in these situations. The tasks may take the form of identifying the meanings of some colloquial expressions, choosing from several written expressions the one which is most suitable to the heard stimulus, writing down the correct responses, or even giving the most appropriate oral responses to the stimulus. The latter, of course, constitutes the task that integrates skills of listening comprehension with speaking and sociolinguistic awareness.

By the same token, if the lesson is oriented toward the CALP domain, teachers should ensure that the materials they select incorporate properties of a formal, sometimes planned spoken discourse. Buck (2001, p. 10) stated that in a planned spoken discourse the relations between ideas are marked by syntactic devices and clear transition signals. Orta (2011) found that nominalization is a prominent feature in spoken academic discourse. Uribe (2008) stresses the mastery of academic words and transition signals that are frequently used in academic lectures. Moving the focus to the learners, Boch and Piolat (2005) stated that tasks for the learners may include note-taking, information transfer, and summarizing the content of the speech. These features should be included in the materials that the teachers want to design.

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The Incorporation of Listening Strategies into The Materials

Recent advances in the teaching of listening comprehension have increasingly criticized lessons which in fact comprise testing of listening skills rather than teaching how to listen. In Field's (2002, p. 246) opinion, teachers tend to concentrate on the product of listening when they should be interested in the process. On the grounds that real-life listening confronts learners with challenges that differ from listening to carefully graded materials in the classroom, the materials should incorporate the teaching of listening strategies. Goh (2002) has argued that more able students do use different cognitive and metacognitive strategies for improving their comprehension, implying that these strategies can be elicited and explicitly taught to learners. Since learners may find themselves in various communicative situations, the strategies should prepare them to strategically deal with these situations. Some of the situations along with the useful strategies are outlined briefly in Table 2:

TABLE 2
Situations and Coping Strategies

Situations	Possible Strategies
Listening to TOEFL recorded materials	Skimming the options quickly and predict what the recorded voice will talk about or ask
Listening to a native speaker talking	Requesting repetition
	Guessing from the speaker's body language
	Confirming the message by rephrasing the speaker's statement "("Oh, you mean we should drop the idea of purchasing the books?")
Listening to a lecture by a professor	Catching the spoken key words and finding the corresponding part in the accompanying handout/textbook; reading the materials before class.
Listening to a radio broadcast	Guessing missed phrases from the subsequent parts; inferring missing details from the overall idea

Principal Considerations in Grading Listening Materials

Grading materials is an indispensable task for a language course or language teacher. It is a necessary step to ensure that the learning materials are just at the right level of difficulty for learners of a given proficiency level, and that the materials are presented in the order of increasing complexity. Good materials will come at a level slightly higher than the learners' current proficiency level so as to challenge them to make progress.

One important factor to consider in grading is the speech rates. This has been discussed in the previous discussion. Logically, the higher the speech rate, the more challenging it is for the learners. Thus, teachers should select materials spoken at low speech rate for the beginning level and gradually present materials with higher speech rates as the learners become more proficient.

In listening comprehension, in addition to speech rates, there are at least five other parameters by which teachers can grade the materials. The five parameters are linguistic characteristics, explicitness, organization, content, and context (Buck, 2001).

Linguistic characteristics include pauses between idea units, the presence of high-frequency vocabulary, and the complexity of grammar.

Idea units are typical in the spoken mode. Speakers normally chunk their ideas in phrases or clauses which are marked off by coherence. Between these clauses or phrases, the speaker usually pauses. The teachers can manipulate the pauses, making them slightly longer than usual when preparing materials for beginners, and gradually shortening them to approximate the lengths found in real-world speeches.

Vocabulary is also a factor that determines the difficulty of the materials. Spoken discourse containing a high proportion of high-frequency vocabulary items will be easier to process than those with less frequent vocabulary items. In a lesson oriented to CALP domain, teachers can look at the transcript of a recorded material and consult the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) to determine whether the recorded material contains a high proportion of academic words, and whether those words come from the high-frequency groups or low-frequency groups. They can even use a more recent development in vocabulary profiling provided on http://www.academicvocabulary.info, which according to Gardner and Davies (2013) is based on a much larger corpus of COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English). To illustrate, a short script of speech is presented below with the academic words in italics. Most of the other words come from the first 1,000 words of the General Service List (Nation, 2002, p. 54).Thus in terms of vocabulary items, they make up a relatively easy text for beginning learners:

> Dog trainers have found that almost all types of dogs have equally good senses of smell. Even though different types of dogs have equivalent senses of smell, they aren't equally good at different tasks. However, certain types of dogs are better at certain tasks because of other characteristics they have.[1]

Finally, the grammatical patterns of a listening material also contribute to the ease of processing by the learners. Complex patterns such as dependent clauses, embedded clauses and subordination tend to increase the difficulty of a spoken discourse. Simple sentences and patterns with coordination, in contrast, tend to make the spoken ideas easier to process. Therefore, the teacher's task is to ensure that the materials intended for students at lower levels of proficiency contain simpler patterns than materials for students at a more advanced level. The two sample transcripts below show the difference in the complexity of grammatical patterns used. The second one contains a relative clause, appositive modifier, and dependent clause, and therefore should be more complex than the first one.

> Engineering is the most popular field of study for visa students. Many study management and business. Most international students major in practical subjects. These subjects provide useful skills that help students find good jobs.

> There are many people today who would like the "traditional" family to return. However, less than 10 percent of families in the 1990s fall into this category. In fact, the single-parent household--once unusual--has replaced the "traditional" family as the typical family in the United States. If we can judge from history, however, this will probably change again in the twenty-first century.

The second parameter besides linguistic characteristics is explicitness. This is the extent to which the ideas are stated explicitly. The less explicit the ideas are, obviously the harder it is for the listeners to comprehend them. Explicitness also concerns the extent to which the ideas are redundant or not. The more redundancy is planted around a central point, the easier it is for the listeners to grasp the message.

Next, organization of ideas also plays an important role in the difficulty of a spoken material. Ideas which are presented in a linear or sequential fashion tend to be easier to understand than those which are not. Moreover, materials in which the main ideas are presented before the more

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[1] Taken from Phillips, D. (2001). *Longman Introductory Course for the TOEFL Test*. (2nd edition). Pearson Education. p. 521

detailed explanation tend to be easier than those in which illustrative examples and specific details precede a more general statement.

The fourth parameter is the content, which includes topic familiarity and concreteness. The more a topic is familiar to the listeners, the easier it is. Also, more concrete ideas are generally easier to perceive than abstract ideas. These characteristics make it necessary for the teacher to conduct a pre-listening activity. This activity should aim to familiarize the learners with the topic by providing them with adequate schema. The activity may take the form of a brief discussion on the general aspects of a given topic that they are going to listen to.

Finally, the context in which the spoken discourse is delivered also affects the ease of comprehension. If the context supplies visual or other kind of support that accompanies the recorded material, learners will find it easier to process. Conversely, the absence of such a visual will force the learners to rely solely on their auditory sense.

Incorporating Listening Strategies into The Lesson

This section briefly outlines the steps in teaching strategic listening comprehension to a class of intermediate learners. As stated in the introduction, the main thrust of this paper is the sharing of strategies among learners. However, it is felt necessary to first present some techniques which equip the learners with background knowledge and build their basic listening skills.

Building the Right Schemata

Lesson objective: to enable the learners to apply the strategies when listening to a lecture.

Steps:
1. The teacher announces to the students that in the next session they are going to listen to a lecture about foods in the USA.
2. The teacher guides the students to use a strategy for getting the most out of the lecture: before listening, students should read a relevant text about foods in the USA to build enough schemata in the mind. Then, during the listening, students will relate the spoken information from the lecture to the knowledge previously gained during the reading in order to assist comprehension.
3. In the next meeting/session, the teacher plays the video or audio material containing the lecture. He or

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she asks the learners to practice the strategies described in number 2 above.

Establishing Correspondence between Sounds And Written Words

Lesson objective: to enable the learners to establish the correspondence between sounds and their printed forms.

Steps:
1. The teacher lets the learners listen to an audio clip and read the transcript (refer to Appendix A for Transcript 1) at the same time. The teacher instructs the learners to notice how the printed words are pronounced.
2. The teacher withdraws the first transcript (or alternatively, asks the learners to put it aside) and distributes the second transcript (refer to Appendix A for Transcript 2). The second one contains some words/phrases/certain grammatical patterns omitted. The teacher asks the learners to listen once again to the same topic from the audio clip and restore in the transcript the missing words/ grammatical patterns.
3. The teacher again collects the second transcript, and distributes the third one (refer to Appendix A for Transcript 3). This third transcript only contains very little of the spoken version. Most of the parts are omitted. The teacher then plays the audio clip for the third time, asking the learners to listen and fill in the transcript with the parts they can catch from the audio.

Cooperative Learning of Strategies

Lesson objective: to enable the learners to learn strategies from their partner.

Steps:
1. The teacher divides the learners into pairs.
2. The teacher plays an audio clip and has each learner listen to it and note down the spoken details.
3. After the audio clip stops, the teacher asks the learners to share information they get with their respective partners. Also, they are to tell each other what strategies they use in order to get the spoken messages. In this way, weak learners may learn from

the more able learners how to listen strategically. Some may not be able to verbalize the subconscious strategies, but this is exactly the step that will compel them to bring their subconscious strategies to a level of consciousness and, by so doing, let others learn from these strategies. Real strategies used by post-intermediate adult EFL learners (Djiwandono, 2006) are as follows: (1) listening carefully, (2) thinking in English, (3) using previous knowledge about the topic, (4) taking quick notes, (5) catching the key words, (6) thinking about the topic before listening to activate the relevant background knowledge, (7) listening to the entire sentence/utterance/unit of ideas before taking notes.

4. Each group/pair reports the results of their cooperation: (1) the ideas that they have successfully gotten from the audio clip, and (2) the strategies that they have shared. The teacher can then lead a discussion on the effectiveness of the strategies they have used, and if necessary, play the audio clip once again to let the learners to verify their answers. Considerable success with this technique was achieved in a class of mixed-ability students (Djiwandono, 2006).

Using Subtitles
Lesson objective: to gradually sensitize the learners to spoken utterances at a normal rate of delivery.

Steps:

1. The teacher has the students watch a short movie or any other video program that features normal rate of speech. The English subtitles are turned on so the learners can match the printed forms of the subtitles with their corresponding spoken utterances.

2. The teacher replays the movie, this time turning off the subtitles. Learners are instructed to understand the utterances without the help from the subtitles. In a small class, different answers may come up; the teacher lets the students exchange ideas about the answers, and later confirms the right ones.

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3. Alternatively, the process might be reversed. First, the learners watch the movie without the subtitles. They are then asked to discuss what the actors actually say.

4. The teacher replays the movie, this time turning on the subtitles. The learners now have the chance to confirm their guesses about what the actors actually say. At this stage, the teacher can show how some sounds are pronounced more clearly than others, how the intonation is played out naturally, and where the stresses fall in the streams of the utterances.

Inferring the Missed Parts

Lesson objective: to enable the learners to infer the missing details in their listening.

Steps:

1. The teacher reads aloud a sentence or plays the middle part of a audio material, while the learners listen to it.

2. The teachers stops the audio and asks the learners to infer the preceding ideas on the basis of what they have just listened.

3. The teacher shows the preceding ideas, letting the learners verify their inference. The teacher then asserts that this inferring strategy is generally effective when they miss some parts while listening to spoken discourse.

4. After letting the learners practice this several times, the teacher engages the learners in one listening session by playing the audio material containing a lecture/dialogue. The teacher tells them to practice the strategy whenever they miss some spoken parts, and to remember their acts of inferring to be shared with other learners after the listening session.

5. The teacher stops the audio, and lets the learners share with their classmates their experience in applying the inferring strategy. They may tell each other what particular spoken clues they used to infer missing ideas, and what prior knowledge they brought on in order to guess the obscured parts. This exchange of ideas will

enrich the learners' strategy repertoire and give them feedback on the effectiveness of their strategies.

CONCLUSION

The paper has drawn up a guide for grading listening comprehension materials and suggests a few techniques for a listening comprehension class. It argues that rather than relying on intuition, teachers should consider several important features that are inherent in spoken discourse. These are the fleeting nature of sounds, speech rate, sound modification, redundancy, and discourse structure. The varying extent of these features may help teachers select and order their materials in increasing complexity. In addition, teachers should be aware of the domain of language use they orient their learners to. Orientation to BICS require non-academic topics and the inclusion of its typical stylistic characteristics, while an orientation to CALP will tend to include more academic topics along with their typical styles. In keeping with the spirit of teaching listening rather than testing listening, teachers should also include listening strategies into their materials. Finally, they need to arrange their materials along five parameters, which include linguistic characteristics, explicitness, organization, content and context.

Armed with the knowledge of the nature of spoken language, teachers can then proceed to designing lessons that enable the learners to listen strategically. These techniques start with activating the appropriate schemata in the learners' mind prior to the actual reading, connecting the printed orthographical forms and the pronunciation, getting used to normal rate of speech by manipulating movie subtitles, sharing with peers strategies that work for comprehending oral messages, and training how to infer missing parts when listening.

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Appendix A

Transcript 1

People used to think that playing online games can be harmful to the brain.

They argue further that the changes in the brain may lead to disruptive

behavior and decreasing cognitive performance. But that worry was voiced

almost a decade ago. Now, thanks to continuous research in this area,

researchers begin to be able to identify some positive effects of online games

on interpersonal and cognitive skills.

Transcript 2

People used to think that playing online games can be - - - -. They argue

further that the changes in the brain may - - - and decreasing cognitive

performance. But that worry was - - - almost a decade ago. Now, thanks to -

- -   in this area, researchers begin to be able to - - - some positive effects of

online games on interpersonal and cognitive skills.

Transcript 3

People used to think that playing online games can be harmful to the brain

[*the learners are to take notes here to get the subsequent ideas after the*

above sentence]