“Listening makes my brain hurt”: Issues of listening for students who are speakers of languages other than English.

Gillian Green

Listening effectively as a language learner is frequently cited as the most difficult part of acquiring another language and yet, without good listening skills, communication can be fractured or faulty. Students of language, regardless of their age, can be easily demoralised by weaknesses in listening success. Listening activities in language classrooms frequently focus on learning new vocabulary and grammatical forms but a new context may create an entirely new set of difficulties. Equally, content subjects being taught in the students’ second language can mean that those students struggle to grasp essential meanings. So is listening acuity part of the sequence of learning or are we as teachers responsible for taking steps to ease the burden of listening for our students? This paper examines the difficulties students face and suggests some teaching strategies which can be utilised to make learning by listening more effective, written by a language teacher who is also a language student.

I am a language teacher and was until recently an adviser to mainstream secondary teachers with ESOL students in their classes in New Zealand. Every day of my teaching I am aware of the listening burden of my students and, like other ESOL teachers, I try to modify my speaking in amount and form, and to hand on to my students listening strategies with the hope of making the task a little more manageable. But increasingly I have queried how effective I have been in the latter role. Students consistently say that learning by listening is difficult. “If I have to listen too much, my brain aches,” said one - and that rang a bell.

For I am also a language learner. From 1997 to 2001 I returned to live in Indonesia, a country in which I had spent influential years of my childhood, and I worked hard and quite metacognitively to relearn the language. I was aware of effective learning strategies and I kept notes on my learning and that of my husband. I went to an intensive language school where English was never spoken, and followed that with weekly sessions with a tutor at home; I enrolled in and completed an extramural degree course in
 Indonesian language from an Australian university, and I engaged every day in conversation ranging from daily needs to educational philosophy to weaving traditions and techniques.

In those four years I became an effective communicator in Bahasa Indonesia, able to change register and topic with relative ease, but the listening activities which my language teacher devised frequently had me doubting my language ability. He used to tape the radio news from a commercial programme focussed on the young—that is, the language was fast and colloquial. He would pre-teach essential vocabulary and then expect me to acquire the gist and, after a subsequent exposure to the material, detail as well. I would listen with an intensity that was exhausting but, when questioned later about details which I had understood at the time, I could not recall anything, and my confidence in my abilities would be seriously shaken.

Learning about listening

I learned a lot from this experience as a student and as a teacher. As a student I learned that under the pressure of listening demands I could apply very little of what I heard to learning about the language: I simply did not have time to comprehend and at the same time store for future reference. I also realised that so much of my attention was being taken by listening for sense that I could not recall details later, even though I knew what they were at the time of hearing them. I could not listen for gist and commit details to memory simultaneously. I needed more time. I needed redundancies. I needed the give and take of interaction to follow up lapses in my understanding. Yet I considered myself a reasonably good strategic language learner – I focussed on key words, I actively learned vocabulary, I did not follow unknown vocabulary items to the lack of what followed, I was a highly motivated learner who felt a deep emotional attachment to the language community and who really wanted to speak the language well.

This experience began to nag at me as a teacher. Was it possible to give students strategies to improve their listening, or was listening skill a matter of the sequence of learning? Was listening truly part of the language acquisition process or was that true only when new or imperfectly known
vocabulary was not part of the equation? Could students really listen for meaning and cognitively store new semantic or syntactical items at the same time? Could students be the primary instigators of improvements in their listening skills or was this development a feature of modified input?

**Listening for communication**

Listening with reasonable accuracy is a crucial part of being a communicative participant in language. It is integral to all social activities. In a classroom, the imperative to listen is consuming for most students who are using English as a second or third language. Their success and failure within the school system in a textbook-reduced education structure, as is common in New Zealand, is dependent on their being able to decipher, decode, understand, store and recall the information provided by teachers and peers in direct teaching and in discussion. Are we as teachers asking more of them than they could possibly achieve? More importantly, are teachers part of the problem rather than the solution?

**Listening issues**

We all listen more in our daily lives than we utilise any of the other language metaskills. It has been estimated that we listen twice as much as we speak, four times as much as we read, and five times as much as we write. Rost (2002) defines listening as a multi-layered process involving:

- receiving what that speaker actually says – hearing correctly;
- constructing and representing meaning – decoding;
- creating meaning through involvement and imagination – applying prior knowledge of content and community norms, and predicting ahead;
- negotiating meaning and responding – working out an appropriate response.

**Research into how we listen**

Wipf (1984) describes listeners as having to carry out rapidly a range of tasks, including discriminating one sound from another, understanding...
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lexical items, deciphering the meaning carried by grammatical structures, grasping the importance of stress, recognising intent, interpreting this within the context both of the moment and of the sociocultural norms, and, if a reply is expected, retaining this meaning to enable a meaningful response to be formulated. Clearly listening is complex and involves developing and adapting interpretations of the world within a linguistic context that seldom permits repetition of input. This can be difficult enough in one’s first language; in a second language it also demands that the listener change or adapt linguistic competence.

Chomsky’s proposal of the notions of competence and performance in 1965 was postulated on the concept of the ideal speaker-listener, something which the average second language learner is very unlikely to be. He asserted that performance was dependent on competence but that the reverse is not true. Lyons (1996), in his explanation and expansion of this theory, raised the possibility that “the acquisition of competence is partly or even wholly dependent upon, and in this sense is a function of, performance and text” (1996: 16).

Rereading this, I found it made more sense now than when I had first read it because, throughout the process of regaining my facility in Bahasa Indonesia, I had felt that using the language I currently knew vastly improved my understanding of it in a cognitive sense. The chance to experiment and trial newly acquired forms and structures allowed me to reuse them creatively at a later time, which in turn expanded my competence.

Canale and Swain (1980) developed Hymes’ concept of communicative competence by suggesting that such skill comprised grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences. The first involved an understanding of lexical items and the rules of how a particular language was structured to transfer meaning; the second represented a grasp of the sociocultural rules of that language’s varieties and uses; the third meant the ability to combine grammar and meaning in sustained text (oral and written) in a variety of genres; and the last related to the ways in which a speaker could cope with difficulties or confusions in actual performance. Bachman (1990) proposed a communicative language ability model which involved, firstly, organisational competence, or the ability to understand
the structures of a language and to produce them in comprehensible form, ideally accurately; and pragmatic competence which comprised the illocutionary aspects of communication and the ability to make sense of, and adjust to, the sociocultural parameters of the language community. Both these models presented a clear description of the situations in which I constantly found myself as a learner. I needed to understand not only lexical and semantic items, but also how they were patterned together, and how sociocultural demands meant that some forms were similar or very different from those of my own language— and why. Listening gradually became more proficient as I grappled with these aspects, but this did not happen during the listening experience itself.

Much of the research into listening focuses on how people listen, on what is in all probability happening (since we cannot see this process going on). Researchers draw parallels with the reading process in that we listen, too, from top-down and bottom-up stances; we use our knowledge of topic, content, text type and so on to assist with a grasp of meaning, and our knowledge of the language itself to decipher sounds, lexical items and grammatical threads.

**Listening involves prediction ....**

Listening, like reading, involves the collaboration of the listener in the context, the intent and the topic. As effective listeners and speakers of our own language, we are well-equipped to predict what another person is likely to say next so we actually run ahead. All of us have been faced with situations where we are able to finish another’s sentence. For example, I relate a story about a horrific accident that I witnessed. I am shocked and excitable and I say: “It was terrible. I knew I had to help in some way but honestly it was so dreadful that I really didn’t know where to ....”

An English speaker may not know me well enough to predict what I will say on the basis of an intimate knowledge of my language patterns, but knowing English well, he or she would know that in that context and with that purpose the likelihood is high that the next word would be “start”. If I had begun to say the word, such a listener would have instantly eliminated the word “begin” — it does not start with “s”. If “start” had not been
predicted, a proficient listener would have quickly recognised it by analysis of acoustic structure relevant to the topic. This skill takes much longer to achieve in a second language. I found that I quite quickly managed to use prediction strategies in contexts well-known to me but only within a narrow range of options. Where the language was more formal or the topic was new, I could not use this aspect of my strategic competence effectively and had to fall back on bottom-up processes of trying to understand individual words and phrases, and tying that knowledge to what I thought was being said—a slow, frustrating (and often incorrect) process.

... and prior knowledge

There are many theories on how we listen and make sense of the input but they all rely on a relationship between a knowledge of the lexis, of the semantics and context, (and memory), and a cognitive understanding of the discourse community which provides the shared framework of ideas, word meaning and experience. Because of our knowledge of all three of these features within our own discourse community, we can usually correct errors caused by misunderstanding by inferring what we should have heard, described as a feed forward phase based on anticipation and a feedback phase based on recognition of discrepancy (Byrnes, 1984). This is how we can play with words, and pun and make jokes because we know the collocations, the double meanings and the potential alternatives in meaning provided by stress, intonation and inference.

Our prior knowledge, then, plays a crucial part in the skilful listening that we practise. Just as in reading, we need to activate schemata to comprehend what we hear, and these schemata will form part of our shared discourse community. We access our knowledge of the topic, content and linguistic approach from memory and then reshape those schemata as we attach new information. Anything new to us will be given more focus for sense, syntactic role and phonology to be attached appropriately to the schema or schemata that may be useful storage sites. It is this, too, which allows us to listen selectively, understanding what is vital to access and what is irrelevant. I became very aware of this when I realised that I could listen with perhaps 98% accuracy to formal lectures or casual discussions on Indonesian textiles and at the same time take notes in English; confident
in the context, vocabulary and discourse community, I could predict likely content, reformulate without stress if I made a mistake, and simultaneously translate. But more interestingly to me, I could afford to give attention to anything new during the listening and acquire it as new knowledge, stocking up new vocabulary or new structures. Because I had, like Vandergrift’s “advanced learners”, “internalised a critical mass of linguistic knowledge [in this field, I] could devote attention to the discourse level of the [language event]” (1997:496).

...and exposure to data

Understanding in any listening situation relies heavily on the listener and speaker sharing conceptual patterns, values and worldviews and on the listener already having enough exposure to the data to be able to make inferences and create patterns. Without this exposure, the listener will spend much time attempting to build a new schema based on analogy and rejecting those schemata which do not fit the changing situation, and will have difficulty dealing with lexical and semantic details unless some negotiation of meaning is permitted. So much time will be spent in this anxious casting about for meaningful patterns that much of what is being said will be unheard and much of what is heard will not be stored.

...and memory

This raises the role of memory. Memory appears to have two components influencing linguistic acquisition: short-term memory which is what is active at any given moment; and long-term memory which is the storehouse of all we have learned. Short-term memory is a working memory, a focused attention which is sustained for short periods of time—anywhere between six and 30 seconds, according to the theoreticians, depending on whether the information is still being utilised. If information in the short-term memory is rehearsed sufficiently and if the information has value to the listener, it will be transferred to the long-term memory in a visual or acoustic form. A comparison can be seen in learning a phone number: if the number is important to you, if it is for someone you will need to contact often, that value and the regular rehearsal will store that number so that you will be able to recall it years later, even when it may no longer be of use. If,
however, the number is a store which you will call once to find out whether they stock a particular vacuum cleaner bag, you will hold that number in your short term memory long enough to carry out the task and then you will let it go. You will do no further rehearsal of the number because it has no value, and though you may be able to remember it for a few minutes, a week later you will have to look it up again.

In the long term memory, information seems to be stored in schemata according to meaning where different items can be “cross-referenced”, which explains why one memory can so often trigger another. Repeated use of the stored information makes its storage firm and retrieval available to a range of cues. Retrieval of language items, however, is not rapid, even with familiar terms or structures. (See Ericsson and Kintsch, 1995, for an interesting brief assessment of the cognitive processes in memory creation.) Wolfe (2001) claims data is stored in two forms: procedural and declarative. The former is knowing how to do something rather than knowing what, while the latter represents the ability to recall data either episodically, which is reconstructing where and when the information was acquired, or semantically which is word-based including meaning and rules for the words’ use. This was very relevant for me as a language learner; when I needed to recall a particular item and how to use it, I frequently found myself reviewing the crucial episode in which this item made sense to me. But I needed time for this skill to work effectively—time to acquire the knowledge and time to rehearse it.

... and time

The vital aspects in this processing of material for memorisation are the use of current or newly created schemata, and rehearsal time, without which new information will stay in the short-term memory for the few seconds that are common and will then be lost. So where does this leave a second language learner? In a phrase, in difficulty. Researchers such as O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Vandergrift (1997;1999;2002), Nunan (1998), Field (1998) and Oxford (1990) have looked in detail at the importance of cognitive and metacognitive skills in listening and the role these play in language acquisition. I do not doubt their importance because I know how useful they can be. I do, however, question whether many
pre-advanced students have the ability to use them. For students to become
cognitive during listening, to be able to think, “Aha! That’s how you say
that!!” while they are dealing with gist and detail, they need a wide and
deep lexical store. By that I mean that they must have a lexicon that not
only covers a good range of topics but also contains a good selection of
synonyms within that range. Secondly, the learner needs a sound grasp of
the ways in which meaning is put together within the language. This takes
time and application. After four years of daily exposure to and interaction
with the Indonesian language, lots of opportunities to listen and to use it, I
was still made anxious by sustained listening because I knew that five per
cent unknown lexis or an unusual semantic pattern would leave me at risk
of missing the point, and the need to understand in order to communicate
made it impossible to have a “Eureka!!” moment because I could not afford
to let my concentration lapse at any time when I was outside my linguistic
comfort zone.

This has a lot to do with prior knowledge and comfort with the context.
Non-native speakers of English studying in English in secondary and
tertiary institutions may know a good deal about the subjects they are
learning but they may have that knowledge in a different language and
within a different social context. Prior knowledge does not helpfully jump
unaided from one language to another—the concept may be known but
seldom discussed, even in the first language. To express that concept in
English, a student needs the vocabulary, the structures, the right textual
form and the appropriate discourse community to answer or, indeed, to
ask questions. This retrieval cannot and does not happen as rapidly in a
second language as in the first and in the meantime the precise context
of a particular statement or question has moved on. Only when students
are completely and fluently at ease with vocabulary, structure, context and
discourse community can they successfully apply appropriate prediction.
Lack of success means having to backtrack and, in most listening situations,
there is simply no time to do that.

These students must deal with rapid input and accent variation which
means that they have no time to rehearse and store. If they move away
from listening for meaning and follow an unknown item with a “What does
that mean again?” moment, they lose what follows. If they are not fluent
with the vocabulary, pronunciation or structure of a particular situation, they cannot filter what they have just heard, and thus cannot store it, and that has nothing to do with laziness or not doing assigned homework. It may mean that they never had the chance to replay, rehearse and store. The data is gone and will never be available for use.

**What can teachers do to help?**

So I asked myself what I as a teacher could really do to help? Is it possible that part of the answer lies with experience as a second language learner? Is it possible to extrapolate from an individual experience to the wider classroom environment? What did I want as a language learner in a demanding language context? That I could answer.

I wanted explicit teaching of structure and the opportunity to practise it in non-threatening ways before I had to make it my own. I wanted vocabulary and I wanted an immediate chance to use it because that was the only way it made sense to me and the only way that I could remember it. I wanted thinking time—pauses to allow me to think about what I had heard, and talk time, a chance to question or discuss what I had heard. I wanted input to reflect what was common in conversation—the short bursts of input and output, because I found my language learning was advanced less by what I heard than by the demand of forming my responses. At that point I was highly cognitive, dredging up knowledge of lexis, structure and semantics, consciously thinking through what I knew I should do, and if I could not do it, then finding a way around it.

So my own recent experience and research into how we listen and how we commit to memory began to suggest a pathway for me as a teacher. As teachers we have a role in helping students to predict content, to process data and to store it effectively. I am going to go back to my own needs as a listener because, talking with students, I know these are shared needs.

**Shared needs**

*Prior knowledge*
Firstly, I was much more secure if I knew what the context and the likely
topic was. That allowed me to bring possible vocabulary forward and it allowed me to predict, not only what I would hear but also what I might not understand. That in turn allowed me to relax into the listening because I was prepared for some misunderstanding and was not so distressed when it happened. With that knowledge in place I could use my top-down processing and stop fruitlessly pursuing unknown words or phrases. I needed my teacher, excellent though he was in many areas of my learning, to help me create a schema to deal with what I was going to hear by talking with me about my understanding of the context. It would have been helpful to have had a purpose for listening that was more scaffolded than simply to listen and answer post-listening questions which he posed for me. Only in artificial classroom situations might we ever be expected to listen without an aim; carrying out such activities teaches the listener nothing about being a cognitive listener. When I knew the likely topic and had a reason for listening, I knew which strategies to employ to help me.

**Familiar vocabulary**

I needed vocabulary in the topic but I needed to have practised using those words if they were going to be useful to me. Pre-teaching the vocabulary did not help me unless I heard and used those words more than once before I really needed them because one written exposure was insufficient for me to recall word and meaning when I heard it. I needed to talk about the words in a meaningful context for a relatively short time before the listening task—so that I could hear them and speak them several times before I had to hear and recognise them in sustained text. This created an interactive component even if the task itself was non-reciprocal and made the task itself more accessible.

**An outline (visual text)**

If I knew the likely pattern of what was going to follow, I could predict more effectively. When the structure of certain Indonesian oral text types was made explicit to me, I found myself able to deal more successfully with what I heard. Sociocultural factors meant that such texts, especially in formal situations, often began with apologies for perceived or ritualised failings, and regularly used the complex third person passive construction that renders speech less personal and more polite. Teachers often know the value of advance organisers, but how often do we return to them to let
students know where they are? An illuminating experience for me on the value of supporting material occurred during a wonderful address on the making of the great batiks of the Central Javanese courts. We were given a handout that not only gave us the Javanese terms that we were going to hear but also provided an illustration of the process in the form of little pieces of fabric attached to a flow diagram—a graphic outline. The address itself was spontaneous but the speaker was experienced, so the words flowed with few hesitations, a direct parallel with our classrooms. The graphic meant that, even though the complex address often left the point to digress or to respond to questions, it always came back to the pattern and I never became hopelessly lost.

Clearly, such written support, allowing me to double-check my comprehension, was extremely useful. Handouts offered the same opportunity to review and confirm. What I also appreciated was his summarising at frequent intervals. I was lucky that Indonesian sentence structures often repeat the subject of the sentence and that its rather circular argumentation meant that important or interesting points were frequently returned to in order to elucidate further. Those syntactical gambits allowed me a second bite at the apple.

Knowledge of linguistic signposts
It helped in transactional listening if I knew the speaker’s verbal gambits for signalling a change of direction or important points. Like all second language learners I often had to translate everything I heard because I did not recognise the clues that a digression or an exemplification had begun. I learned, however, that the term jadi in Indonesian (meaning “thus” or “so”) often preceded a summary or an evaluative statement. I therefore focused on what followed. Individuals’ speaking styles affected my listening success. Gus Dur, who had had a stroke and whose background had been in the religious schools of East Java, was much more difficult to understand than Habibie who spoke clearly and deliberately. He avoided the involved religious metaphors that were part of Gus Dur’s natural speech organisation, and he used shorter sentences, reduced slang, sufficiently expressive intonation and clear pronunciation. I knew that listening to Gus Dur required more of my attention and a conscious aim to listen for gist, not detail, while Habibie’s speeches allowed me greater flexibility. It may
be important in the classroom for teachers to make their verbal transitions more explicit to students to assist them in deciding when to focus more acutely.

**Comprehensible output**

Vitally, I wanted chances to interact with the information. I wanted what Swain (1985, 1993) refers to as “comprehensible output”. The value of such output had two bases. Firstly, social listening situations demanded that I ask questions and provide feedback to support the conversation. If I misunderstood something, I needed the chance (and the practice) to ask for clarification either by asking for a direct repetition or by posing statements such as, “By that, do you mean…” Paying attention to other people’s questions and comments permitted a revisit of the content, but also allowed me to try out my own understandings—strategic competence at work. Secondly, comprehensible output demanded that I make conscious use of what I had been taught: I actively reviewed grammar and culture lessons and vocabulary as I structured questions or responses. How effective I was, I could gauge initially by how readily I was understood. Subsequently, with friends, I asked for corrections of errors, and those I remembered episodically and semantically.

**Pauses**

And finally I needed pauses to review and evaluate. I was lucky again. Indonesian culture does not seek to fill every pause with speech so it is normal to have quiet moments in conversation. Pauses after a question but before an answer allowed everyone time to think and to replay the question to ensure full understanding—it allowed rapid make-up time. After an answer was given, pauses often encouraged a further response or a longer answer and gave me another opportunity to deal with content. There has been some interesting research on the role of “wait time” but it was experiencing this as a learner that taught me its value. Without thinking time, I could not review what I had heard in my head, repeating phrases, checking my grasp of lexical items, attaching what I was hearing to the schemata I had activated. I realised it was this lack of time, rather than a complete failure of understanding, that often reduced my listening confidence and competence. A lack of review time meant I could not remember details later, a frustrating and demoralising experience. If we
examined the average pause time in a mainstream classroom, we, like Stahl (1994), might find that as little as one second passes before a teacher begins to rephrase the question or to exemplify it, which presents the student with a new set of listening problems. A moment of silence was a gift of significant proportions.

Conclusion

Listening communicatively is something that all learners of another language hope to be able to achieve, and is something that probably all learners fail to achieve to their expectations. As a skill which involves active processing, it is subject to the vagaries of individual learners’ language levels, attention spans, personal circumstances and preferred learning styles. Though much can be done to assist students acquire good listening practices, the important role of listening in many educational environments demands that we as teachers make some gestures towards lessening the huge burden that listening so frequently places on learners. This paper examined the issues one language teacher learned by being a language learner.

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