

“Listening makes my brain hurt”: Issues for teachers of listening for students who are non-native speakers of English

Gillian Green

My experiences as a language learner

I am a language teacher and was, for several years in New Zealand, an adviser to mainstream secondary teachers with non-native speakers of English in their classes. My job was to help these teachers make their teaching more understandable for students. Every day of my own teaching, I am aware of the listening burden of my students and, like other ESOL teachers, I try to modify my speaking in amount, form and speed. I have taught students useful listening strategies with the hope of making the task a little more manageable, but I continue to question how effective I am in that role. Students consistently say that learning by listening is difficult. “If I have to listen too much,” said one, “my brain aches,” —and that made me think.

I know exactly what that student meant. Over the years I have been in a position to learn French, Spanish, Thai, Chinese and mandarin Chinese, and between 1997

and 2001 I returned to live in Indonesia, a country in which I had spent several years as a teenager. I worked hard and quite metacognitively to relearn the language I had spoken as a child. I was aware of good learning strategies and I kept notes on my learning. I went to an intensive language school where English was never spoken, and followed that with weekly sessions with a tutor at home; 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 if I was exposed to a new topic and a new learning

environment I could quickly be demoralised by how little I appeared to be able to deal with. 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 a thing.

I learned a lot from this experience as a student and as a teacher. As a student I learned that listening demands were often so intense that I did not have time to think about what I knew about the language. I was so busy trying to understand that I could not store data for future reference. Because all my attention was taken by decoding the message and listening for sense, I could not

remember details later even though I had fully understood them while hearing them—I could not listen for meaning **and** commit details to memory at the same time. 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 trying to work out what they meant (and thus missing what followed), and 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.

So 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 present? Could students learn new forms and store them at the same time as

As a student I learned that listening demands were often so intense that I did not have time to think about what I knew about the language.

listening for meaning? Could students help their own listening or was it up to teachers to modify their language to ease the task?

What happens when we listen?

When we are proficient listeners ourselves, we tend to forget how hard the task is for young people who may be learning the language **as well as** learning through the language. Before students can even begin to deal with meaning, they must carry out a considerable range of tasks:

- * distinguish one sound from another,
- * understand individual words,
- * decipher the importance of grammatical structures (tenses, for example),
- * grasp the importance of stress,
- * recognise intent and interpret this within the context of the situation (classroom, talking about a TV programme, lunchtime gossip) and of the socio-cultural norms (how do I agree or disagree? How do I interrupt?).
- * comprehend the meaning of the whole speech act,
- * retain that meaning to enable a sensible and appropriate reply to be formulated (if a response is required). This means that schema of knowledge stored in the long term memory must be accessed and utilised.

Listening in any language is an active and complex process, but it is particularly difficult in a second or subsequent language. It is a crucial skill for all social activities, and students learning content in another language must decipher, decode, understand, store and recall information provided by teachers and peers in an environment where the target language may not be widely spoken. Are we as teachers asking more of them than they can reasonably achieve? More importantly, are we as teachers part of the problem rather than of the solution?

Are we as teachers asking more of them than they can reasonably achieve? ... are we ... part of the problem rather than of the solution?

The importance of prior knowledge

Listening and understanding both depend on a relationship between knowing the words, the grammar and the context, and having stored memory to call on AND sharing with the speaker a framework of experience and ideas—the hardest listening any of us has to do is when we do not know much about the topic under discussion. (Vandergrift, 1997: 496)

This is all part of *prior knowledge* and this is as crucial in listening as it is in reading. When we know something about the topic and the context, we can quickly make sense of new data. In functioning in Indonesian, if I knew the context, something about the topic and the required vocabulary, I could utilise that most important of skills for effective listening—prediction. This means that I could focus on the ideas and the meaning of what was being said because I was not worrying about unknown vocabulary and syntax. (Byrne, 1984).

Non-native speakers must deal with **rapid input – speech, from a more proficient speaker, that is faster than the students can deal with** (often pushed by the demands of school curricula) and with **accent variation** in any situation where they are taught by teachers from a range of language backgrounds. In both cases, they are so involved in listening to understand sense that they have no time to rehearse and store for reference later.

If they move away from listening in order to understand and follow an unknown item with a “What does that word mean?” moment, they lose everything that follows because the brain is fully involved in the search for meaning. If they are not completely comfortable 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 are gone and will never be available for use.

So, I asked myself, what can I do in my teaching to help? Was it possible to learn from what I had experienced as a learner? What did I want as a language learner in a demanding context? What could I, as a teacher, do in the classroom to ensure that students' listening experiences were not demoralising?

Suggestions for teachers

As a learner, I was much more secure if I knew what the content and the likely topic were. In real life listening, we are very seldom faced with a listening situation for which we are not to some degree prepared. Such situations unfold gradually, featuring several repetitions and redundancies so that a listener gets several chances to make sense of the aural text. As a learner, if I was prepared for the context, I was also prepared for what I might **not** understand as well as for what I would grasp. With that knowledge, I could use top-down processing and stop fruitlessly chasing unknown words or phrases—I could stay on top of the listening.

Purposeful listening

Teachers can help by talking about the situation, comparing it with similar (or dissimilar) experiences, and preparing students with an aim **before** the listening task, rather than the aimless post-listening questions. In real life listening we know what we are listening for and why we are listening but this does not often happen in the majority of classrooms. Telling students what to listen **for** will enhance their ability to use focused, purposeful listening rather than vacant listening, and will improve their chances of listening successfully. This can include asking students to listen for particular facts or words or sequences of events.

Vocabulary practice

Secondly, students need a wide vocabulary range for general listening, but these words need to be practised. Teachers talk a lot—too much, some researchers would say—and their students are expected to take content from what is being said as much as by what is written down. Every lesson we give is a long listening task for our students and we seldom prepare them sufficiently. We too often forget that what is in our own heads may not be in the heads of our students. Pre-teaching vocabulary for five minutes before a listening task is of no use; the students then become so concerned about listening for those words that listening for sense is impossible. I needed to talk about the words and interact with them before I needed them for the task. One written exposure was a waste of time; I needed to see, hear and speak the words before

I could possibly recognise them in sustained text. Students need a firm grasp of the vocabulary required for any learning through listening and it is our responsibility as teachers to **ensure that crucial vocabulary is taught and practised**, not just left to chance. Language teachers are accustomed to preparing students with new vocabulary but a school's

English teachers are **not** responsible

for the teaching of the vocabulary of Science or Social Studies or Mathematics; each of us in the teaching profession is responsible for actively teaching the vocabulary of our own subject and for drawing students' attention to crucial words, playing with them and reinforcing them.

Advance organisers for prediction

Thirdly, if I knew the likely pattern of what was to come, I could use predictive strategies more effectively. Teachers know the value of advance organisers which go up on the board at the beginning of every lesson to tell students what will be in the lesson and how the content will be dealt with, yet few of us use them to support students' learning. Instead, we tend to present students, hour after hour, with a listening burden for which we

Telling students what to listen **for** will enhance their ability to use focused, purposeful listening rather than vacant listening, and will improve their chances of listening successfully.

effectively **prevent** them preparing. This is neither fair nor representative of normal listening in which subjects change gradually. Accessing prior knowledge and the schema of learning is crucial for using the predictive skills which are vital for making sense of what we hear. Because this was what I needed as a student, I became committed to providing **advance organisers** for every segment of my teaching, which I write on the board with a step-by-step format and to which I return often so that students know where they are.

The advance organiser reviews quickly what has been already covered in previous lessons and then spells out the purpose of this lesson and the steps which will be followed to present it, including new vocabulary. For example, a unit on graphs will likely contain one on line graphs. The advance organiser might look like this:

Last time: Last time we looked at

Vocabulary test: Label the parts of this graph.
Use these words:

Vertical axis	horizontal axis
Axis title	graph title
Key	

This lesson: Line graphs.

New vocabulary: You will hear, read and learn these new words:

trend	decline
rise	fluctuate
level off	peak
recover	plateau
halve	treble

Step 1:	What are line graphs? Where do we find them?
Step 2:	What do line graphs tell us?
Step 3:	How do we read them?
Step 4:	How do we create them?
Step 5:	Your turn
Step 6:	Review

Such written support was important to me as a language student as it helped me to check my comprehension.

Periodic summarising

What I also appreciated was **periodic summarising**. I was lucky in studying Indonesian because the sentence structures often repeat the subject of the sentence and the rather circuitous argumentation pattern meant that important points were repeated in order to elucidate further. These aspects allowed me a second bite at the comprehension apple, and I realised that I could do the same thing in the classroom. If, at the end of every major point in our teaching, **we summarise that point in one or two sentences**, we ensure that struggling students have a chance to catch up while more able students are permitted a moment to review and commit to memory.

Signposts

It also helped me as a learner if I knew the speaker's **verbal gambits for signalling a change of direction or the beginning of a new point**. Like all second language learners, I had to translate everything I heard because I did not recognise when the speaker digressed. Once I understood that there are verbal clues that make these changes clear, I was better equipped to follow. I now tell my students when I am digressing or making an important point to which they should pay particular attention. When teachers complete the point they are making and move on to a new one, they need to say that, summarising the point completed and then saying, "Now let's move on to ..."

Clear, well-paced speech

Individuals' speaking styles also affected my chances of aural success. Those speakers **who spoke clearly and at a measured pace**, so that I could hear every word, were a boon to me as a learner. Those people who used language as a management technique, unsettling me with long sentences, reduced my ability to understand. This reinforced my care in choosing my words in the classroom. I had always tried to keep my language

within a vocabulary range which most non-native speakers could handle and I had worked hard to reduce my natural speaking speed. My aim is to follow the example of Paul Nation and teach within a vocabulary range of the First 2000 Words of English. It is my responsibility as a teacher to be fully comprehensible to all students; I am not the one doing the learning.

Step 5 ~ Your turn

Vitaly, too, I wanted chances to interact with the information. I wanted what Swain (1985; 1993) refers to as “comprehensible output” – the chance to talk. The value of such output had two bases. Firstly, all listening situations demand that we ask questions and provide feedback to support the conversation. Students need 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...?” or “Can you explain that again?” Paying attention to other students’ questions and comments permits a revisit of the content, but also allows learners to try out their own understandings – strategic competence at work. Secondly, I found that 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. It was in talking that I became the most active as a language learner. And yet in most classrooms across the world, the one doing most of the talking is the teacher, who already knows the data and does not need to practise it. We **must** be prepared to hand the learning back to the learner if our students are to become proficient in their control of another language.

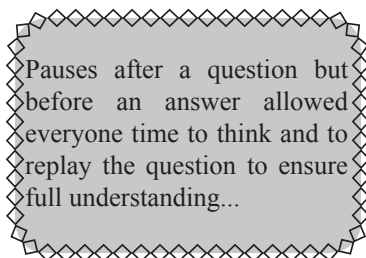
Step 6 ~ Review

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 me rapid make-up time. Pauses after an answer was given often encouraged a further response or a longer answer and gave me another opportunity to deal with content. This was illuminating to me. 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 this 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. It was this lack of time, I realised, 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.

Summary

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 affected by individual learners’ language levels, attention spans and personal circumstances. 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.



Pauses after a question but before an answer allowed everyone time to think and to replay the question to ensure full understanding...

References

- Byrnes, H. 1984. The Role of Listening Comprehension: A Theoretical Base. *Foreign Language Annals* 17 (4): 317-329.
- Stahl, R.J. 1994. *Using "Think-Time and "Wait-time" Skillfully in the Classroom*. ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies. ERIC identifier ED370885.
- Swain, M. 1985. Communicative competence: some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass and C. Madden (eds) *Input in Second Language acquisition*. Newbury House, Rowley, Mass.
- Swain, M. 1993 The output hypothesis: Just speaking and writing aren't enough. *Canadian Modern Language Review* 50:158-64.
- Vandergrift, L. 1997. The Cinderella of Communication strategies: Reception Strategies in interactive listening. *Modern Language Journal* 81(iv):494-505.

Personal records 1997-2001