

■ EDITORS: C N CANDLIN & H G WIDDOWSON ■

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■ A SCHEME FOR TEACHER EDUCATION ■

Listening

ANNE ANDERSON & TONY LYNCH

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Language Teaching:
A Scheme for Teacher Education

Editors: C N Candlin and H G Widdowson

Listening

Anne Anderson and Tony Lynch



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The authors and series editors

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Through work with The British Council, The Council of Europe, and other agencies, both Editors have had extensive and varied experience of language teaching, teacher education, and curriculum development overseas, and both contribute to seminars, conferences, and professional journals.

Introduction

Listening

There is no shortage of listening materials intended to meet the language teacher's need for interesting and attractive activities. The purpose of this book is to stand back from the surface detail of comprehension materials and to provide an overall perspective on listening as a communicative activity and as a language learning activity.

In Section One we discuss the findings of research into what language comprehension involves, how it relates to the other skills of communication, and to what extent it seems possible to develop comprehension skills both in the mother tongue (L1) and in a foreign language (L2). In particular we look at the notion of grading, which we believe to be the key to the construction of systematic programmes to teach listening.

Section Two deals with issues of immediate concern to the language teacher: On what basis can I choose (or design) listening materials? How can I judge the effectiveness of materials as I use them with my students? We examine the views of listening that underlie commercial materials and illustrate our recent work in the area of comprehension task design, including the results of piloting identical materials with L1 and L2 learners.

The purpose of Section Three is to encourage readers to think about and experiment with the creation of materials appropriate to the needs of their own students, by working on a series of small-scale design and research tasks. The tasks are intended to lead to principled decisions about how best to approach the teaching of listening in the light of the three broad issues dealt with in the first two sections: How much of what is known can I apply? How much of what has been done is likely to be effective? How can I assess my students' improvement as listeners?

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of a number of people who have participated directly or indirectly in the development of this book. In particular, we should mention Professor Gillian Brown of the University of Essex, who directed the 'Listening Comprehension Project' that we worked on during the period 1982-5 at the University of Edinburgh. The project (JHH/190/1) was funded by the Scottish Education Department and we are grateful for this financial support; however, the views expressed in this book are our own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department.

Our thanks also go to the teachers in Lothian Region secondary schools and staff at the Institute for Applied Language Studies, Edinburgh, who piloted our experimental teaching materials with their L1 and L2 students respectively and agreed to record their classes' performances. The final shape of the book owes much to the influence of the series editors, Henry Widdowson and Chris Candlin. The fact that they moved several thousand miles apart during the writing of the book is coincidental.

Finally, we should draw attention to a stylistic detail, but a non-trivial one. At points in the book we refer to the individual teacher as 'she' and to the individual learner as 'he'. Although this probably reflects the sexual balance of the classroom worldwide, the two pronouns should be read as unmarked forms.

Anne Anderson
Tony Lynch

Language Teaching: A Scheme for Teacher Education

The purpose of this scheme of books is to engage language teachers in a process of continual professional development. We have designed it so as to guide teachers towards the critical appraisal of ideas and the informed application of these ideas in their own classrooms. The scheme provides the means for teachers to take the initiative themselves in pedagogic planning. The emphasis is on critical enquiry as a basis for effective action.

We believe that advances in language teaching stem from the independent efforts of teachers in their own classrooms. This independence is not brought about by imposing fixed ideas and promoting fashionable formulas. It can only occur where teachers, individually or collectively, explore principles and experiment with techniques. Our purpose is to offer guidance on how this might be achieved.

The scheme consists of three sub-series of books covering areas of enquiry and practice of immediate relevance to language teaching and learning. Sub-series 1 focuses on areas of *language knowledge*, with books linked to the conventional levels of linguistic description: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. Sub-series 2 (of which this present volume forms a part) focuses on different *modes of behaviour* which realize this knowledge. It is concerned with the pedagogic skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Sub-series 3 focuses on a variety of *modes of action* which are needed if this knowledge and behaviour is to be acquired in the operation of language teaching. The books in this sub-series have to do with such topics as syllabus design, the content of language courses, and aspects of methodology and evaluation.

This sub-division of the field is not meant to suggest that different topics can be dealt with in isolation. On the contrary, the concept of a scheme implies making coherent links between all these different areas of enquiry and activity. We wish to emphasize how their integration formalizes the complex factors present in any teaching process. Each book, then, highlights a particular topic, but also deals contingently with other issues, themselves treated as focal in other books in the series. Clearly, an enquiry into a mode of behaviour like speaking, for example, must also refer to aspects of language knowledge which it realizes. It must also connect to modes of action which can be directed at developing this behaviour in learners. As elements of the whole scheme, therefore, books cross-refer both within and across the different sub-series.

This principle of cross-reference which links the elements of the scheme is also applied to the internal design of the different inter-related books within it. Thus, each book contains three sections, which, by a combination of text and task, engage the reader in a principled enquiry into ideas and practices. The first section of each book makes explicit those theoretical ideas which bear on the topic in question. It provides a conceptual framework for those sections which follow. Here the text has a mainly *explanatory* function, and the tasks serve to clarify and consolidate the points raised. The second section shifts the focus of attention to how the ideas from Section One relate to activities in the classroom. Here the text is concerned with *demonstration*, and the tasks are designed to get readers to evaluate suggestions for teaching in reference both to the ideas from Section One and also to their own teaching experience. In the third section this experience is projected into future work. Here the set of tasks, modelled on those in Section Two, are designed to be carried out by the reader as a combination of teaching techniques and action research in the actual classroom. It is this section that renews the reader's contact with reality: the ideas expounded in Section One and linked to pedagogic practice in Section Two are now to be systematically *tested out* in the process of classroom teaching.

If language teaching is to be a genuinely professional enterprise, it requires continual experimentation and evaluation on the part of practitioners whereby in seeking to be more effective in their pedagogy they provide at the same time—and as a corollary—for their own continuing education. It is our aim in this scheme to promote this dual purpose.

Christopher N. Candlin
Henry Widdowson

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SECTION ONE

Explanation Research into listening

1 What is listening comprehension?

1.1 Introduction

We tend to take listening for granted. Imagine, for example, that you are about to board a bus in a noisy city street. You continue talking to a friend and listening to her replies; you understand when the driver, whose voice you have never heard before, tells you what the fare is; you notice that a small child on the bus has started crying; you realize that the music that had been blaring out of the clothes shop by the bus stop has been switched off. All this happens—or, more exactly, you *accomplish* all this—at the same time and without any noticeable difficulty.

We only become aware of what remarkable feats of listening we achieve when we are in an unfamiliar listening environment, such as listening to a language in which we have limited proficiency. Even managing to separate speech from non-speech sounds seems a real achievement: the other parts of the process which we take for granted in our L1—dividing an unfamiliar speaker's utterances into words, identifying them, and at the same time interpreting what the speaker meant and then preparing an appropriate reply—now become formidable tasks. It is hardly surprising that people everywhere believe that 'foreigners speak too fast'.

Another common problem that we face as L2 learners is that, even if we have carefully rehearsed a particular utterance and manage to produce it to a native speaker, it may well result in a torrent of language from the other person. Our carefully practised request for bread leads to an unintelligible stream (or so it seems) of comment from the shop assistant about the type, quantity, price, or unavailability.

► TASK 1

We can try to overcome limited proficiency in *speaking* a foreign language by rehearsing what we intend to say. Are there any *listening* situations where rehearsal would be effective? What would be the difference between such situations and ones where rehearsal would be pointless?

This sort of difficulty highlights two facts about listening. Firstly, it shows that listening skills are as important as speaking skills; we cannot communicate face-to-face unless the two types of skill are developed in

tandem. Rehearsed production is useless if we are unable to respond to the reply that it generates from our interlocutor (i.e. the person we are trying to talk to).

The second point about listening is that, under many circumstances, it is a reciprocal skill. We cannot practise listening in the same way as we can rehearse speaking, or at least the part of speaking that has to do with pronunciation, because we cannot usually predict what we will have to listen to. In this book we shall be concerned primarily with this kind of reciprocal listening—listening where there is at least the opportunity for speaker and listener to exchange roles—as opposed to the non-reciprocal or one-way listening involved in, for example, listening to the radio.

Listening effectively involves a multiplicity of skills. Let us construct a very simple step-by-step picture of the various elements that might be thought to make up the process of listening in face-to-face conversation:

- 1 The spoken signals have to be identified from the midst of surrounding sounds.
- 2 The continuous stream of speech has to be segmented into units, which have to be recognized as known words.
- 3 The syntax of the utterance has to be grasped and the speaker's intended meaning has to be understood.
- 4 We also have to apply our linguistic knowledge to formulating a correct and appropriate response to what has been said.

As we shall see (in 2.2), there is evidence that these listening skills are deployed not as separate steps but *simultaneously*—which makes listening an even more formidable achievement.

This picture of the linguistic side of comprehension is already rather complex, but this is by no means all that is involved in listening. We listen for a *purpose*, not merely as a way of exercising language skills. Since we have non-linguistic purposes in listening, it follows that listening effectively also involves non-linguistic skills.

► TASK 2

What are the 'extra' skills needed in listening to the following people?

- 1 a recently widowed neighbour talking about her husband's funeral
- 2 a five-year-old describing her birthday party
- 3 an elderly relative who has become very upset and breathless, trying to tell you where his medicine is kept
- 4 an official explaining how to make an insurance claim.

Our listening purposes may be primarily social, as in the case of chatting to a stranger to pass the time waiting for a train. Here, the additional skills

necessary to the social purpose will include, for example, judging whether the speaker is upset or angry and then making the appropriate sympathetic noises, whether or not we actually understand the reasons for their mood.

Alternatively, our purpose may be primarily to extract information. We might ask the way to a particular destination and have to understand the directions we are then given. In this case, we need to deploy cognitive skills in order to relate the spoken information to the non-linguistic environment in order to decide, for example, how the utterance 'go past the church' relates to our current physical location.

► TASK 3

Imagine you are staying in a hotel in a city you do not know well. You have a meeting at an office which you were told is about five minutes' walk away. You need to ask directions to the office. Would it be an easier listening task to get the information by (1) ringing the hotel reception desk, or (2) asking a passer-by outside the hotel? Why?

In discussing the broad distinction between purposes of communication, Brown and Yule (1983a) coined the terms 'interactional talk' and 'transactional talk'. 'Interactional' is used to refer to speech that is primarily social: in 'transactional' communication the main purpose is to achieve a successful transfer or exchange of information. However, the two terms represent what is in fact a continuum, from the social to the informative aspects of listening. Many situations fall in between the two extremes and will therefore require a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic skills. In this book we will examine the kinds of skill that are involved in effective listening, how they develop in native listeners, and what we might do as teachers to facilitate this development in native and non-native listeners.

1.2 What is successful listening?

There are a number of different ways in which the listener can process—or fail to process—incoming speech, which could serve as a basis for evaluating the degree of success of a particular listening performance.

First, the listener *may not hear adequately* what has been said, due, for example, to competing background noise or unfamiliarity with the speaker's accent. Under these circumstances, the speech may have been 'heard' in a strictly limited sense: the listener recognizes that he has been spoken to, but has no idea what the message contained in the speech was.

Second—and this is presumably a common problem for the foreign listener—speech may contain words or phrases that the listener *can hear*

adequately but is unable to understand because of serious problems with the syntax or semantics of the foreign language.

Third, there are times when the listener is perfectly able to hear and understand the speaker, but *may have 'switched off'* consciously or unconsciously. For instance we might suddenly remember that we have only ten minutes before the banks close. In this sort of situation it is common to find ourselves allowing the incoming speech from our interlocutor to flow past us as a stream of sound which we make no attempt to process.

Fourth, there are those messages which the listener *attends to fully and from which he tries to construct a coherent interpretation*. We might consider this last situation to be one of maximally co-operative listening, in the sense that the listener is both able and willing to play his part in the reciprocal activity of communication.

Traditionally, listening has often been regarded, alongside reading, as a passive language skill. We have already suggested how it involves *more than language*; we also need to challenge the view that listening is merely 'passive' or 'receptive'. As we hope to show in this book, the role of the successful listener has to be thought of as an *active* one. Understanding is not something that happens because of what a speaker says: the listener has a crucial part to play in the process, by activating various types of knowledge, and by applying what he knows to what he hears and trying to understand what the speaker means.

► TASK 4

English makes a distinction between the activities of 'hearing' and 'listening'. What is it? Is the same distinction made in other languages that you know?

We have already suggested that effective listening involves a large number of component skills. Effective listeners actively engage in the process of comprehension: they apply the relevant internal information available to them in order to construct their own interpretation of what has been said. They do not passively receive and record.

► TASK 5

Think about the use of the word 'listen' in these four situations. What are the differences between the processes involved in each case?

- 1 The parents asked the baby-sitter to listen at the child's door every fifteen minutes or so.

- 2 I had to listen to his complaints about the cost of living for the best part of an hour.
- 3 The President's spokesman has admitted that a listening device had been placed in the Secretary of State's office.
- 4 The most important skill a doctor has to learn is to be a good listener.

The teacher or researcher interested in developing or studying listening faces a fundamental problem: it is impossible to gain direct access to the listening process itself. We can never actually observe the problems the student may experience and the skills he uses. Did he pay attention? Was he unfamiliar with the form of the message? Or with the content? Did he try actively to construct an interpretation of what was said? We are able only to deduce what the listeners did with the message and what they found difficult by examining their response—whether spoken, written, or non-verbal.

To try to overcome this basic difficulty, we can set learners tasks that require them to demonstrate in an observable way their comprehension of some aspect of what has been said. However, it is not always easy to pinpoint the stage in the listening process that may have resulted in a less than satisfactory response. We can think of the three parts of the sequence: *input* (the words uttered by the speaker); the *listening process* (the listener's application of various types of information available to him), and *output* (the response from the listener).

We can never be certain that a student actually heard the input adequately, except by trying to ensure that the listening environment is reasonably free from extraneous noise and that the sound level of the input seems satisfactory. Of course, we have to strike a balance between, on the one hand, maximizing the student's chances of performing adequately by providing an ideal listening environment and, on the other, providing practice and experience in a realistic context.

Another aspect of this trade-off between idealized training conditions and the need for realistic preparation for listening outside the classroom is the nature of the tasks we set learners and the responses we require of them. For native listeners, the commonest setting for listener responses is spontaneous conversation. So for L2 learners, too, practice in conversational skills should be an essential part of a language course.

But as Brown and Yule (1983a) point out, friendly casual conversations among native speakers are relatively undemanding on the listener. They are primarily social events. The interlocutors often produce short stock replies which keep the interaction going and add to the general feeling of friendliness, but are relatively informationless. This is because the maintaining of a friendly atmosphere, rather than the exchange of information, is the main reason for this kind of conversation.

It is important that both L1 and L2 learners get sufficient training in the more demanding and equally necessary skills of transactional listening, where the focus of communication is on the exchange of information. These skills are unlikely to be adequately developed through social conversational practice alone. From observing a pair of students engaged in interactional talk we would not be in a position to decide whether the occasional 'uhuh' and 'hmm' produced by one of them was in fact evidence of full comprehension, partial comprehension, or simply the 'automatic pilot' response of someone who has, as we said earlier, switched off due to boredom, worry, or perhaps the availability of a more interesting topic in another conversation nearby.

► TASK 6

In this invented dialogue, A is describing how to make a good curry. Pay particular attention to B's responses.

- 1 Decide whether he is trying to follow and remember what A is telling him, or whether he is simply making polite conversational noises.

A: Now the important thing about making curry is the spices. They must be fresh, not out of those horrible little tins you've had at the back of the cupboard for ages.

B: Uhuh.

A: Then you must fry the spices in oil, before you add the meat.

B: In oil, oh.

A: Yes. Then you brown the meat in the spices before you add any liquid.

B: I must remember that. Have you tried that Indian in Elderslie Street? It's really good.

- 2 What other information would you need in order to be more certain in your judgement of B?

All types of listening skill are valuable and necessary if a learner is to acquire an all-round ability to listen effectively in a range of situations, to various types of input, and for a variety of listening purposes. There are two principal reasons for our stressing the importance of listening that is primarily transactional in this book. First, for many students it seems to be the most demanding and is therefore a skill that needs a considerable amount of practice and training. Many native speakers have difficulty with this kind of listening, as we shall see in 2.3 and 7. Second, it is an area of listening which is in danger of being overlooked in courses for foreign learners that focus their listening training on the sound system or grammar of the language, or alternatively on oral practice in friendly, social conversations.