

# Teaching and Learning Second Language Listening

Metacognition in Action

Larry Vandergrift  
Christine C. M. Goh

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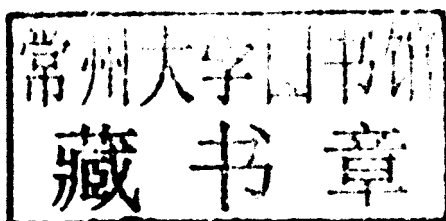
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“This book is a very well worked out approach to listening from a metacognitive viewpoint. It is firmly based on research and experience and combines both theoretical and practical aspects of listening in a very readable way. It will be of great value to those who have an interest in learner strategy development, learner autonomy, and the metacognitive development of a language skill.”

I. S. P. Nation, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

“Vandergrift and Goh, two highly accomplished and skilled thinkers and writers, have produced a volume that will have an important place in the applied linguistics literature for many years to come. The authors have a keen sense of where the field of L2 listening pedagogy is right now and where it needs to go, and the volume most definitely assists us in getting there.”

Andrew Cohen, University of Minnesota, USA

This reader-friendly text, firmly grounded in listening theories and supported by recent research findings, offers a comprehensive treatment of concepts and knowledge related to teaching second language (L2) listening, with a particular emphasis on metacognition.

The metacognitive approach, aimed at developing learner listening in a holistic manner, is unique and groundbreaking. The book is focused on the language learner throughout; all theoretical perspectives, research insights, and pedagogical principles in the book are presented and discussed in relation to the learner.

The pedagogical model—a combination of the tried-and-tested sequence of listening lessons and activities that show learners how to activate processes of skilled listeners—provides teachers with a sound framework for students’ L2 listening development to take place inside and outside the classroom. The text includes many practical ideas for listening tasks that have been used successfully in various language learning contexts.

Larry Vandergrift is Professor, Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa, Canada.

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To our respective spouses Kathy and Paul,  
for their love and faithful support;  
and to our children,  
Michael, Ellen, Andrea, and their families; and Nicole;  
for cheering us on.

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lessons that avoid the pitfalls of earlier practices that merely tested what was heard, and instead tap into the processes involved and the potential that learners themselves bring to improve L2 learning. We acknowledge there may be limitations to some of our ideas. All aspects of this approach have not yet been fully researched. However, since a metacognitive approach has rarely been presented with both principles and practical examples, we hope that this book will be helpful to extend existing discussions and lead to more improvements in the future.

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# Acknowledgments

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Many years of classroom teaching led each of us separately to recognize the importance of listening in language learning and to investigate the nature and role of learning strategies in listening comprehension. The results of our doctoral research, one in French second language classrooms in Canada and the other in English second language classrooms in Singapore, led to the same conclusion: learner metacognition plays a crucial role in learning to listen and understand another language. We became aware of each other's work through our respective publications and that led to collaborative efforts, such as development of the Metacognitive Awareness of Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) and, eventually, this book. It is our hope that this book will help teachers around the world better understand the process of listening comprehension and become more effective in their efforts to develop successful language learners.

In writing this book, we have been encouraged and supported by many people. We would like to acknowledge:

- the support and encouragement of our respective families;
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Larry Vandergrift  
Christine C. M. Goh

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# Prologue: Reflection on Issues Related to Teaching and Learning Listening

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Before reading this book, we ask you, the reader, to take a moment to reflect on your own experience and approach to teaching second language (L2) listening. The way you were taught to listen in language classes, your encounters with target language speakers, and your teaching experiences have likely influenced your perceptions about how to teach others to listen. It is important to understand your own assumptions and beliefs—why we do what we do in the classroom—and critically examine the impact of our own practices for learners. Only then can we consider other perspectives that lead to new approaches and different outcomes.

The statements on the next page summarize some common perceptions, right or wrong, about learning and teaching L2 listening. Read these statements and take a few moments to reflect on the degree to which you agree or disagree with each one. In order to clarify your assumptions, we encourage you to discuss your responses with a colleague or a classmate.

As you read through the chapters of this book, recall these statements and the questions that surfaced as you considered your own response, or debated the issues with your colleagues or class. We will revisit these statements in the Epilogue, after you have read and critically examined the various dimensions of teaching and learning L2 listening discussed in this book.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Partly agree	Agree	Strongly agree			
1	2	3	4	5	6			
1. Compared with the other language skills, listening is a passive activity.			1	2	3	4	5	6
2. The most important thing in listening instruction is that students get the right answer.			1	2	3	4	5	6
3. Learner anxiety is a major obstacle in L2 listening.			1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Listening means understanding words, so teachers just need to help learners understand all the words in the sound stream.			1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Teaching listening through video is better than audio alone.			1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Learners with good listening ability in their first language will also become good L2 listeners.			1	2	3	4	5	6
7. When teachers provide learners with the context for a listening activity, they give away too much information.			1	2	3	4	5	6
8. Interactive listening, conversation with another speaker, is more difficult than one-way listening (i.e., radio and television).			1	2	3	4	5	6
9. Letting students listen on their own, according to their interests, is the best way to develop listening skills.			1	2	3	4	5	6
10. Captions and subtitles are useful			1	2	3	4	5	6

## Part I

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# Learning to Listen

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# Challenges and Opportunities in Listening Instruction

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### Scenario

It is time for Class 2B to have their listening lesson. Miss Campbell tells her students to take out their course book and look at the listening exercise on pages 28 and 29. She tells them that they will be listening to a passage about wedding rites of a group of people who live in Asia. Next she tells them to read the questions and the multiple-choice answers for the listening passage very carefully. She explains that this will help them find out what the passage is about as well as what to listen for when the recording is played. When the class is ready, she plays a CD recording of a listening passage.

The students listen attentively and select what they think is the correct answer to each question. When the recording ends, Miss Campbell plays it a second time so that learners can check their answers. After this, she goes over each question and gives them the correct answer. Finally, she checks how individual learners have performed and then goes over some of the difficult questions and explains the correct answers. When this is done, the class moves on to the next part of the lesson, which requires them to write a short composition based on what they have heard from the passage.

### Pre-reading Reflection

1. Does this listening lesson resemble any of the listening lessons that you have experienced as a learner or taught to your students? What are the similarities or differences?
2. Do you think it is useful to ask learners to preview the comprehension questions? Why or why not?
3. Some people would say that this lesson tests listening rather than teaches it. What is your response to this statement?

## Introduction

Listening is an important skill: it enables language learners to receive and interact with language input and facilitates the emergence of other language skills. Compared with writing and reading, or even speaking, however, the development of listening receives the least systematic attention from teachers and instructional materials. While language learners are often taught how to plan and draft a composition or deliver an oral presentation, learners are seldom taught how to approach listening or how to manage their listening when attending to spoken texts or messages. Although they are exposed to more listening activities in classrooms today, learners are still left to develop their listening abilities on their own with little direct support from the teacher. A possible reason for this is that many teachers are themselves unsure of how to teach listening in a principled manner. We believe that every language teacher needs to have a clear understanding of the processes involved in listening and in particular how strategies can be used to manage comprehension efforts. A teacher also needs to know how to harness the potential for learning inherent in every student, so as to help them achieve success in developing listening and overall language proficiency.

Listening activities in many language classrooms tend to focus on the outcome of listening; listeners are asked to record or repeat the details they have heard, or to explain the meaning of a passage they have heard. In short, many of the listening activities do little more than test how well they can listen. Because learners are often put in situations where they have to show how much they have understood or, more often, reveal what they have not understood, they feel anxious about listening. In addition, when they not only have to understand what the person is saying but must also respond in an appropriate way, learners' stress and anxiety levels increase even further.

In addition to anxiety, learners also face the challenge of not knowing how to listen when they encounter listening input. Although pre-listening activities are a common feature in some classrooms, these activities mainly provide learners with the background knowledge they need to make listening easier. Learners are "primed" to listen to a specific piece of text through a pre-listening activity, but they are seldom taught how to listen once the audio or video begins. For example, many learners need time to get used to the speaker's voice or "tune into" the message. They often miss the first parts of an aural text and they struggle to construct the context and the meaning for the rest of the message (Goh, 2000).

Once learners begin listening, they are often expected to complete the listening task without any help along the way. The nature of spoken text, experienced in real time, does not normally allow the listener to slow it down or break it down into manageable chunks. Many teachers also feel



that they should ask learners to listen to the input without any interruption or repetition because this mirrors real-life communication. The downside of this practice is that learners are constantly trying to understand what they hear but never get a chance to step back and learn how to deal with the listening input. Unlike reading, where the teacher can direct learners' attention to specific parts of a reading passage or ask guiding questions to scaffold their thinking and comprehension, listening lessons do not typically offer such opportunities for learning. As a result, learners do not learn about strategies they can use to improve their listening ability, nor do they understand the processes that are involved in learning to listen in a new language.

Another instruction gap is the lack of guidance on how learners can self-direct and evaluate their efforts to improve their listening. Many learners who desire to improve their listening participate earnestly in all class listening activities in the hope that these will help them become more successful listeners over time. They also look to their teachers to show them how they can improve their listening abilities. Usually, the advice is to listen to songs more, watch more movies, listen to the radio or watch the news on TV, and find native speakers as conversation partners. Most of these activities, when planned by the teacher, are accompanied by "homework" that requires learners to demonstrate some outcome of their listening. These outcomes might include writing a summary of a movie or TV news report they have watched or giving a response to something they have heard. Efforts to improve, however, are sometimes not sufficiently monitored or supported. Learners may try their best to engage in listening on their own outside class time, but they may not know how to take advantage of these opportunities to improve their listening proficiency. Second language (L2) learners need to be supported and to understand the listening processes they are using. In short, teachers need a way to engage learners' metacognition in teaching listening.

Metacognition, or the act of thinking about thinking, refers to the ability of learners to control their thoughts and to regulate their own learning. It plays an important role in learning to listen. There is a general consensus among researchers in the fields of comprehension and second language (L2) learning that metacognition enhances thinking and comprehension (Baker, 2002; Wenden, 1998).

Although metacognition is a crucial aspect of learning to listen, it does not have a significant and explicit role in many language classrooms. A survey of the various approaches to listening instruction shows that listening has gained greater prominence in language teaching, but listening lessons have, until recently, been mainly text-oriented and communication-oriented rather than learner-oriented. The focus of much listening instruction has been on getting learners to comprehend, on their own and with little support, the meaning latent in a piece of spoken text. With time