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TEACHING TIP

LISTENING SKILLS INSTRUCTION: PRACTICAL TIPS FOR PROCESSING AURAL INPUT

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Two listening challenges faced by English L2 learners are (1) successfully identifying words in continuous speech and (2) understanding a speaker's intended meaning. Listening is a skill L2 learners report wanting to improve, yet teaching practices often fail to advance learner knowledge and control of listening processes. Instructors can benefit from empirically-supported recommendations to help learners parse continuous speech, and discern speaker intent. This Teaching Tip shares two 3-part strategies to facilitate processing utterance content and interpreting message meaning. The practical tips presented here are consistent with a return in the larger TESOL field to a true communicative approach, relying on authentic materials and real communicative contexts rather than mere mimicry of connected speech features or particular intonation contours.

INTRODUCTION

Skilled listening is an essential part of communication, one which facilitates the emergence of other skills. Yet current work in second language pronunciation pedagogy suggests that listening is the subset of 'pronunciation' that is still earning the dubious distinction of "neglected orphan" (Deng et al., 2009; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Gilbert, 2010) relative to other skills. This is striking in light of its proportional importance. As noted by Nunan (1998), "over 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening" (p. 1). Despite this prominence, listening has also been described as "the least understood and most overlooked of the four skills in the language classroom" (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 37). According to Vandergrift and Goh (2012), listening is the skill over which learners feel the least control and for which they receive "the least systematic attention from teachers and instructional materials" (p. 4). Indeed, most listening skills textbooks tend to bypass listening instruction, and focus instead on note-taking, a skill which presupposes the ability to comprehend the listening input. Finally, listening is found to be the skill for which teachers have received the least training (Graham, 2017; Siegel, 2014).

Novice teachers–or even seasoned teachers newly tasked with teaching listening–might turn to their institution's curriculum guidelines for direction. In an academically-oriented intensive English program steeped in the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, teachers may discover listening objectives that are not operationalized ("Learners will understand…" does not answer the question, *As measured how?*) and that parallel reading objectives. Such 'objectives' provide no indication of where to start or how to go about the task. A representative sample of Guidelines for high-intermediate to advanced-level learners in a typical CEA-accredited intensive English program illustrates the conflation of reading and listening skills objectives. Consider the requisite skill to meet this reading objective: *Understand the main ideas and significant details.* Next, consider the requisite skill to meet this listening objective: *Understand main points and the*

most significant details. To meet the reading objective requires ability to decode orthographic print, and pre-supposes working with literate students. As anyone who has worked with pre-literate students from limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) populations has discovered, you cannot simply hand out a passage with instructions to read and answer the comprehension questions. Learners who cannot read cannot process orthographic input. A comparable insight regarding teaching listening seems to have eluded us; that is, in the absence of instruction on how to process aural input, you cannot direct students to listen to a passage and expect them to process or fully comprehend it.

To recap, listening is an essential but difficult skill. In CLT classes, the focus of listening instruction seems to be the end product of comprehension. That is, as captured by Mendelsohn (2006), "Much of what is traditionally mis-named *teaching* listening should in fact be called *testing* listening" (p. 75). Describing this as a text-oriented approach attributable to the influence of traditional reading pedagogy, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) noted in a review of listening instruction that, "Instead of teaching how to listen accurately, listening activities tested the accuracy of learners' comprehension" (p. 6). Fortunately, however, listening has been receiving priority in empirical studies (Vanderplank, 2013), with a concerted effort underway to translate research into practice. As advocated by Field (2008), newer pedagogical guidelines call for listening to be taught as a language skill in its own right.

Two challenges for L2 listeners have been identified (Goh, 2000), and these mirror acquisition challenges for children acquiring their first language(s): parsing a continuous speech stream, and understanding speaker intent. Consider examples for English L1: the oft-cited mishearing by children of a Christian hymn, "Gladly the cross I'd bear", as a song about a cross-eyed bear named Gladly, or the exchange reported by Berko Gleason and Ratner (2009) of the first-grader bragging that the third-grader on his school bus was impressed by his new back pack because the older boy had said, "Big deal". The following examples illustrate these two challenges for English L2 learners.

Listening Challenge 1: Parsing connected speech to understand utterance content

Think of this as the 'izzybizzy' [IzibIzi] phenomenon. None of the three words in isolation is likely to pose problems for even beginning-level English-learning students; yet in connected speech, these words do not sound like they look in citation form. As experienced by one of our newly-arrived master's students some years ago who had cleared customs at the airport, retrieved his baggage, and found the taxi stand, he was flummoxed when the man in front of him in line asked, "Do you mind if I smoke?" to which he wanted to reply–or at least look up the word, but had no idea how to spell it since, as he put it to us, "What's a [maindIfai]?" The result of inability to segment continuous speech is that learners fail to recognize known words in rapid discourse.

What accounts for this may be the decoding strategies learners use to understand utterance content. Field (2008) notes that learners miss more function words than content words, perhaps attributable to adhering to what they are taught in test-prep classes: Pay attention to the content words, the little words aren't important. They may also unconsciously be applying L1 segmentation strategies to locate word boundaries. However, cross-linguistic differences in world-boundary acoustic cues adversely impact L2 segmentation discourse (Altenberg, 2005, Carroll, 2004). Even advanced

learners have been shown to transfer L1 phonotactics even when the L1 phonotactics are not helpful (Al-jasser, 2008; Weber & Cultler, 2006). According to Broersma and Cutler (2008), learners also substitute known words for unrecognized words and have difficulty suppressing wrong choices. To illustrate what this looks like in practice, examine this sample dictation from a pronunciation elective class:

Challenge 1, Illustrative sample: Dictation task

> *Teller all meter at the bank.*

The advanced-level students who had (mis)transcribed this utterance vigorously insisted that this is what I had dictated, all the while acknowledging that it made no sense.

Listening Challenge 2: Interpreting English intonation to understand speaker intent

The source of this challenge has been captured by Tomlinson and Bott (2013): "Often what a speaker intends to say is not directly retrievable from a linguistic form; rather listeners must infer it" (p. 3569).

To illustrate how this plays out, consider a common classroom exchange, reported in Reed and Michaud (2015):

Challenge 2, Illustrative sample: Student – teacher exchange

> Student: "Teacher, can I turn in my assignment late?"
> Teacher: "You *can*."
> Student: "Okay, thanks!"

The teacher's words are affirmative, yet the message is negative. L2 listeners who miss the point of an utterance may be relying solely on the words, unaware of the signaling function of intonation. Wichmann (2005) accounts for the seeming contradiction of affirmative words conveying a negative message by ascribing to intonation "the power to reinforce, mitigate, or even undermine the words spoken" (p. 229). The native-speaker listeners are sensitive to what Wells (2006) refers to as the implicational fall-rise pitch contour whereby "a speaker implies something without necessarily putting it into words […] Something is left unsaid–perhaps some kind of reservation or implication" (p. 27). The non-native listeners, on the other hand, may be unconsciously applying L1 pragmatic interpretation procedures to comprehend conversation implicatures or to go beyond the literal meaning of an utterance (Cutler, 2001; Garcia, 2004). When listeners fail to attend to prosodic cues, the result is that they fail to grasp the message despite understanding the words.

Listening skills instruction is called for. In listing key pedagogical principles, Graham, Santos, and Francis-Brophy (2014) report zero or slow learner progress without listening instruction, but effective development with it. In light of research that suggests that less-skilled listeners rely on bottom-up processing (Tsui & Fullilove, 1998), Graham et al. recommend strategies for building, verifying and monitoring bottom up processing in order to augment popular top-down pre-listening Strategies that relate prior knowledge to listening passages. And in keeping with Goh (2002), they

recommend metacognitive strategy awareness and use.

Instructors, too, need strategies to help break down the components of listening in order to teach learners how to actually process spoken input. Metacognitive strategy-based training in connected speech has been found to increase learner awareness and skills necessary to aid word segmentation, and training in contrastive stress and intonation has been found to facilitate understanding speakers' intended meaning as well as the message. To address these two barriers to listening comprehension, Teaching Tips are offered to facilitate development of segmentation skills that allow recognition of known words in connected speech, and to promote awareness of the discourse and pragmatic functions of intonation that allow inferring what is meant by what is said. So where do we start? Two 3-part strategies are shared below to facilitate processing utterance content and interpreting message meaning. The practical tips presented here are consistent with a return in the larger TESOL field to a true communicative approach, relying on authentic materials and real communicative contexts rather than mere mimicry of connected speech features or particular intonation contours.

Understanding what was said

English doesn't sound the way it looks. In continuous discourse, words do not retain their dictionary citation forms. Unlike the written page, there's no white space between the words. Decoding Connected Speech requires knowledge of Connected Speech Processes (CSPs). Teaching Tip: introduce CSPs for in-class practice and incorporate them into your lessons. The figure below provides a one-page see-at-a-glance select list of CSPs with accompanying examples.

Connected Speech Processes: *English doesn't sound the way it looks.*
(important for listening comprehension; not necessary for speaking)

ɪzzybɪzzy ***How many words? Where are the word boundaries? Words don't sound like their dictionary entries.***

Sounds are linked

Consonants to consonants	(same place of articulation: *sit down, last time, some more*)
Consonants to consonants	(different place of articulation: *last page, social media*)
Consonants to vowels	(*take on, talk about*)
Vowels to vowels	(*key issue; go around*)

Sounds are deleted

/h/ in *he, her, his,* and *him*	***Except:*** Sentence-initial: *He's late.*
E.g. *Is he busy? → Is ~~h~~e busy?*	Stressed: *I don't mean him; I mean her.*
Sounds like: *[ɪzzybɪzzy]?*	Pronouns: his/ hers: *That's not his; it's hers.*

Sounds are reduced

can → kn	I can do it. → *I kn do it.*
and → n	Law and Order → *Law 'n Order*; wait and see → *wait 'n see*
an → n	US units (mph) miles per hour → *miles an hour* → *miles 'n hour*
of → ɔ	a lot of time → *a lotta time*
or → r	right or wrong → *right 'r wrong*

Sounds are altered

you → yɔ	See you later → *See yɑ later.*
After /d/ → jɔ	Would you? → *Would jɑ?* Could you? → *Could jɑ?* Did you? → *Did jɑ?*
After /t/ → chɔ	Can't you? → *Can'tchɑ?* Won't you? → *Won'tchɑ?*
to → tɔ	have to → *haftɑ*
/t/ → D	letter → leDer, better → beDer, water → waDer
you're/your → yer	You're right. → *yer right.* It's on your right. → *It's on yer right.*
After /d/ → jer	You did your homework? → *You di djer homework?*
After /t/ → cher	Put your hat on. → *Pu tcher hat on.*
got to → gotta	
want to → wanna	
going to → gonna	

Words're contracted

(Negative) not → n't*: isn't, aren't, doesn't, don't, won't, can't, shouldn't,* etc.
(Auxiliaries): I am→ *I'm,* I will→ *I'll,* I have→ *I've,* I would/had→ *I'd,* I would have→ *I'd've*
you are → *you're,* you have → *you've,* you will → *you'll,* you would/had → *you'd*
(s)he/it/they→ he's, she's, he'll, she'll, it'll, he'd, she'd, it'd, they're, they'll, they've, they'd
(Modals): could have→ *could 've*, would have→ *would 've*, should have→ *should 've, etc.*
(Existential Pronouns): there is a → *there's a*; there are → *there're*
(Proper Nouns): Jane will …→ *Jane'll;* Bob will → *Bob'll . . .*
(Common Nouns): the judge will . . . → *the judge'll . . .*

Figure 1. Frequently occurring connected speech processes.

A role for auditory feedback

In English-as-a-Second Language settings, that is, when students are learning in an English-speaking country, or when students are accessing YouTube or other available resources, they are exposed to the features whereby words are linked and contracted, sounds are reduced, deleted, and altered. To the extent that input exhibiting these CSPs is not understood in exposure-rich settings or under conventional listening instruction, it must be the case that external input is not a sufficient condition for accurate perception. As suggested by Casserly and Pisoni (2010), the alternative to a focus on perception is shaping the speaker's own speech production to activate robust auditory feedback. A number of studies that explore the conventional precedence of perception over production have demonstrated that production skills can exceed perception abilities (Sheldon & Strange, 1982). While acknowledging that Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model accounts for acquisition of the majority of second language sounds, Linebaugh and Roche (2013) found that production training of problematic second language sounds improved perception, while additional listening exposure did not. Successfully extending their research to additional (perceptually assimilated) sounds, Linebaugh and Roche (2015) concluded, "We find compelling evidence that any model of second language phonological acquisition must accommodate the fact that production can inform perception" (p. A-9). Put simply, when learners' own speech production converges with the target pronunciation, an auditory feedback loop is created whereby "Speaking helps listening" (Reed & Michaud, 2010). Though not yet empirically investigated, it seems plausible that this extends to connected speech. Therefore, inform students that in-class practice producing these CSPs will facilitate out-of-class listening comprehension. Make clear that your students are not required to adopt these CSPs in their own out-of-class speech, nor will they receive error correction for not producing these CSPs in their spontaneous in-class speech.

Armed with knowledge of English CSPs, students are now better equipped to use the two 3-part Listening Strategies described below in order to segment continuous speech and understand the content of what was said.

Listening Strategy 1: Use three kinds of information to process aural input

1. *Use context information–what you already know about the topic of conversation: background knowledge, world knowledge, content knowledge.*

2. *Use language information–what you know about how the English language works: the grammar, the vocabulary, and the sound system.*

3. *Use acoustic information–the sounds that you actually hear someone saying.*

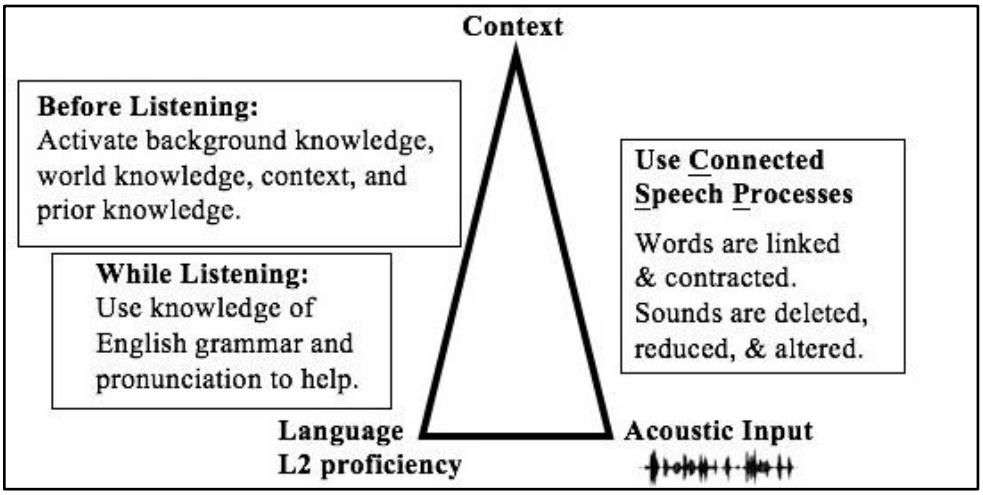

Figure 2. Strategy to facilitate processing utterance content.

Instructional debrief: Supplement strategy instruction with decoding practice

A common classroom activity-the dictation-can be a frustrating experience for students and a very humbling experience for teachers. This is particularly true with students who seem quite fluent when *they* speak, and who generally nod with seeming comprehension when y*ou* speak. Their transcriptions reveal the listening deficiency. Likewise, students' pleas for repeated playing of authentic material, such as snippets from podcasts or TED Talks, reveal their need for effective strategy implementation for efficient listening. The figure below offers three practical steps to implement the listening strategy.

TEACHING TIP: USE THREE STEPS TO PROCESS CONNECTED SPEECH
Step 1: What did you hear? Write down what it sounded like.
Step 2: Does it make sense? Reread what you wrote.
Step 3: What was really said? Use the three kinds of information to decode what you heard.

Figure 3. Three steps to decode aural input.

To illustrate the listening strategy in action, consider how to debrief the incorrect transcription below.

Dictation Example: Tell her I'll meet her…

Use 3 Steps to make sense of what you hear

Step 1: **What did you hear?** Repeat/write down.
Sounds like: *Teller all meter*.
Step 2: **Does it make sense?** Think/reread.
No, but this is what the spoken sentence sounds like.
Step 3: **What was really said?** Reconstruct/ Use 3 Kinds of Information

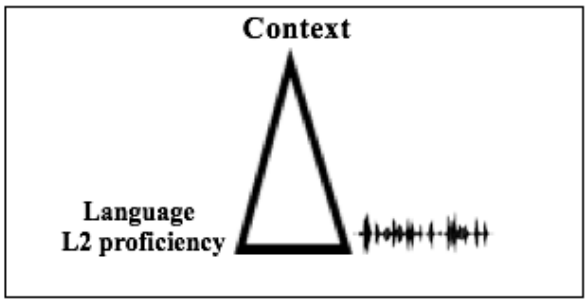

Figure 4. Three kinds of information to process aural input.

1. ***Top Down Processing***. There's no context.
   Background information cannot be activated.
2. Use **language information**.
   Every English sentence needs a verb. Possible verbs: 'tell' and 'meet'. Every verb needs a subject. In a command, the unspoken subject is 'you'. Most English sentences pattern **S**ubject–**V**erb–**O**bject; this one has 2 clauses. *(Will you please) tell her (that) I'll meet her.*
3. ***Bottom Up Processing*.** Use **acoustic (Sound) information**.
   Sounds are Deleted; /h/ ⇒ /Ø/ in ~~*h*~~*e, her, his, him* except: when it's the first word in a sentence or clause; when it's stressed for emphasis; when *his* functions as a possessive pronoun.
   Words are contracted: *I will* ⇒ *I'll*
   Words are linked: *tell ~~h~~er* ⇒ *tell~~h~~er; meet her* ⇒ *meet~~h~~er (Will you please) tell ~~h~~er (that) I'll meet ~~h~~er.*
   Tell ~~h~~er I'll meet ~~h~~er.

Understanding what was meant by what was said

The source of Listening Challenge 2 is perhaps best captured by Paunović and Savić (2008):

> "Students often do not have a clear idea of why exactly 'the melody of speech' should be important for communication, and therefore seem to lack the motivation to master it, while teachers do not seem to be theoretically or practically well-equipped to explain and illustrate its significance" (pp. 72-73).

As Gilbert (2014) observed, learners "will rarely tell the teacher they feel silly speaking this way, and the result will be that they may walk out of the class without having accepted the system at all. Or they may think intonation is simply decorative" (p. 125).

Listening Strategy 2: Use three kinds of information to decode speaker intent

Part I: Neutral, Unmarked Stress & Intonation*

Lexical: stressed syllable is longer, louder, higher (in pitch)
Phrasal: stressed content words; unstressed function words
Sentence: wide English neutral (unmarked) pitch range
Discourse: wide English neutral (unmarked) pitch range

Part II Marked Stress & Intonation

Sometimes, understanding what was said in English feels like trying to break a code.
You can use three kinds of information to help you decode a message.

1. ***Detect the Signal:*** *Marked Pitch Range (extra pitch).*

***Same*/Different**: Listen & Respond: Are the two sentences The Same or Different?

a. She's not a *teacher.*
b. *She's* not a teacher.

2. ***Locate the Signal****: Exaggerated content or function word(s).*
   a. *The word 'teacher' had extra pitch.*
   b. The word "She's' had extra pitch.
3. ***Interpret the Signal****: Attribute speaker intent.*
   a. She's not a *teacher*: She's an engineer.
   b. **She's** not a teacher: He's a teacher.

DISCOURSE & PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF INTONATION

1: Emphatic Stress
Same meaning, just emphasized: X ⇒ X^n
2: Contrastive / Corrective Stress
±stated, Different Meaning: not X, Y
3: Implicational Stress
Unstated, not retrievable form the utterance alone: X + Y

Practice: Listen to the following two sentences; Answer the question; Explain your answer.

1. The teacher didn't' grade the papers.

Question: Have the papers been graded?
No.
Neutral stress & intonation.

2. The *teacher* didn't grade the papers.

Question: Have the papers been graded?
Yes, but not by the teacher.
The word 'teacher' had extra stress & intonation.

Figure 5. Strategy to facilitate interpreting message meaning.

As Levis (1999) cautioned, the historic textbook treatment of intonation is to overemphasize its role in signaling grammatical relations or its role in conveying speakers' attitudes and emotions. Instead, as Allen (1971) advocated, we should provide instruction that "teaches the student to think in terms of the speaker's intention in any given speech situation" (p. 73). To achieve this at the skill level, encourage students to practice *producing* marked stress and intonation in order to be able to *hear* marked stress and intonation. To facilitate this at the level of metalinguistic awareness, encourage students to articulate the communicative and pragmatic functions of intonation. Use metacognitive strategy instruction to introduce the three steps to process speaker intent: detect the aural signal (marked pitch range), locate the signal (exaggerated content or function word), and interpret the signal (emphatic stress, contrastive or corrective stress, or implicational stress). Finally, take advantage of tech tools to raise awareness and motivate practice.

SUMMARY

This Teaching Tip addresses two challenges to processing aural input. It advocates teaching connected speech processes to improve ability to segment continuous speech. It offers a metacognitive three-part strategy to process utterance content to understand what was said, and a metacognitive three-part strategy to process message meaning and interpret speaker intent.

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