

Listening: The Starting Point for Successful Language Learning
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Listening comprehension is a critical skill for language learning. In everyday life, people spend more than 50% of their time listening. And, if you think about it, much of first language learning begins with infants listening for almost a year before beginning to speak. These infants are taking in new information about language and life and trying to make sense of it all. And, even though they are silent, they are still absorbing and integrating all sorts of knowledge.

It should be noted that listening in a second language is perhaps the most difficult of all 4 skills:

- * Listeners are at the mercy of speakers (more than any other skill)
- * Processing requirements are very heavy, listeners must do it while it is happening with no time for reflection.
- * Heavy processing load means that learners lose concentration rather quickly.

Listeners are at the mercy of speakers. They have almost no control over what is going to be said, how it is going to be said, or how quickly it is going to be said. Foreign language learners especially find that the transient words come at them very fast and then are gone just as quickly.

Processing requirements are very heavy. The listening task requires that listeners takes information into their short term /immediate memory. This area has very limited storage capacity. Then, listeners must compare what is in short term memory to the knowledge is stored in long term memory. In this process, listeners are trying to make sense of what they took in, in short term memory. But at the same time, more input keeps coming in. As a result, the processing requirements for foreign language learners is very demanding. Listeners must comprehend the text as they listen to it, retain information in memory, integrate it with what follows, and continually adjust their understanding of what they hear in the light of prior information as well as of incoming information.

This heavy processing load means loss of concentration. We have found in a longitudinal experiment with Russian intermediate students that they can only listen and pay attention for about two minutes. This is due to the heavy processing load and to the fact that foreign language learners may not have enough declarative knowledge in their long term memory to compare to what comes into their short term memory. It is even harder for beginning students who begin to tune out after only 30 seconds.

So, the question is how can language teachers address these important but difficult demands? By paying attention to the following components teachers can help ameliorate the demands of this skill:

- * Role of Attention
- * Role of Memory
- * Role of Affect
- * Role of Planning and Managing Listening

Role of Attention. R. Schmidt, 1995, described attention as a limited capacity system. What this means is that humans can only deal with one source of information at a time although we can switch back and forth between different sources. When multiple sources of information are present, **selective attention** must be used to cope with this. Listeners must determine what they will commit their limited processing capacity at any one time. In order for foreign language learners to be successful, especially as beginning/intermediate students they need to plan where they will put their attention at any one time. By helping students direct their attention, teachers can help learners use attention more wisely and effectively.

Role of Affect. Increasingly, language teachers recognize that a learner's emotions can play a critical role in listening performance.

B. Aniero, 1990, among others have found that greater anxiety correlated with poor listening. It is critical that teachers help learners recognize the role of emotional distress and help learners find ways to decrease that stressor. By helping learners identify what they want to pay attention to at any one time (selective attention) and planning for what is to come, they can contribute to reducing a learner's anxiety. In addition, teachers can suggest possible affective strategies to help learners reduce their stress. These include: relaxation techniques (deep breathing, stretching), setting reasonable goals, and rewarding oneself for small successes.

Role of Memory. Learning consists of *getting, storing, retrieving and using* new information. Memory, along with attention and affect, is critical in this process. Memory for foreign language learning is very much affected by the amount of learners' prior knowledge of (1) one's mother tongue, the target language and any other foreign language the learner knows and (2) the culture of the target language as well as of the world. The extent of this knowledge directly impacts the amount of listening a learner can do at any one point in time. In order to enhance a learner's ability to store information, teachers can direct learners to a variety of memory strategies that will enable the learner to retrieve the information when needed. In addition, teachers need to recognize that learners can't process long passages.

Role of Planning and Managing Listening. Given the challenges of memory resources, the limitations of attention, and the need to manage anxiety, foreign language students need to become more efficient in their processing of input. Planning can be a great help. Just to give a brief example, a woman in one of my Italian workshops, a quite fluent speaker, came to the United States for the first time, and needed to make a doctor's appointment. She picked up the phone and somehow couldn't understand a word. She put the phone back down and thought about what questions the receptionist might ask and then thought about her responses. After planning the call, she redialed and successfully got an appointment. Planning can also help reduce anxiety since learners can reduce the input to a manageable goal, not trying to

listen to every word. Learners need help in learning to set different goals, depending on (1) their language level, (2) their purpose for listening and (3) their language task. Planning¹ consists of (1) setting goals (what you want to accomplish), (2) setting criteria for success (measures of accomplishment of one's goals), (3) task analysis (a) determining task purpose or why you need the information or what you are going to do with it (b) determining task classification or what you might know about the task--what genre, rhetorical style, language characteristics, vocabulary and (c) considering task demands or what you can do to address the task characteristics, and finally (d) developing an action plan-- what are you going to do and in what order.

All of this planning is needed to help learners keep their anxiety down, and make the most effective use of their limited memory and attention resources.

References

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¹ See Rubin, 2005, for a description of the Learner Self-Management model of which planning is a large part.

