# Searching for a New Approach to Listening

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## ABSTRACT

Listening is an essential skill for learners to develop as they acquire a new language. Unfortunately, it has received little attention in the language classroom and language learning literature. This article reviews the current literature on second language listening skill development. Evidence from the review indicates the current approach to pedagogical listening is inadequate in addressing the needs of second language learners. As a result, an eclectic approach, combining the current approach and the process approach is proposed. The review concludes with pedagogical implications for the language listening classroom.

## INTRODUCTION

How important is listening when learning a language? Nation and Newton (2009, p. 37) cite Nunan (1998) who states that "[i]t has been claimed that over 50 percent of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening." However, "it is arguably the least understood and the most overlooked of the four skills (L, S, R, & W) in the language classroom" (p. 37). Because of the difficulty in observing it (Chand, 2007), and the popular perception that it was a passive activity requiring little learner engagement (Morley, 1999), listening was regarded as being the least important language skill. However, listening is now viewed as an active process, vital to the language learning process (Carrier, 2003; Chang, 2009; Goh, 2008) and considered to be potentially the most important of the four skills to develop (Goh, 2002; LeLoup, Cortland, & Ponterio, 2007). This

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recognition has led to listening now receiving renewed focus in the language classroom (Richards, 2005). Unfortunately, many lessons today are based on the comprehension approach (CA) to teaching listening, which has faced much criticism as of late (Field, 2008). Issues raised about the CA, such as the inability to systematically develop listening skills, have prompted interest in new approaches to better assist language listeners in developing their listening ability.

This paper seeks to review the current literature regarding how listening is used in the language learning classroom. The review begins by examining studies that explain how second language learners can use listening to acquire a new language. Attention then turns to how listening is used to develop L2 listening skills. The paper provides a description of the processes language learners use as they listen, including *bottom-up* and *top-down* processes. Also included within this section is the role metacognition plays in the language learning classroom as it relates to listening processes. The paper then introduces the current approach to listening pedagogy, the comprehension approach, and identifies its deficiencies in meeting the needs of language learners. An alternative approach to the CA, the process approach, is then presented with the aim of addressing these deficiencies. While it answers criticisms of the comprehension approach, implementing the process approach may not be immediately practical. As a result, the author suggests an eclectic approach that combines the comprehension approach with the process approach. This combined approach suggests using lessons based on the CA as diagnostic assessments to identify undeveloped listening processes that can be targeted for improvement. The paper ends with a recapitulation of the literature presented, suggestions for future research, and pedagogical implications for the suggestions made throughout the review.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

## Acquisition of Language through Listening

In this first section, the paper will examine how listening assists language learners acquire particular aspects of another language.

Richards (2005) notes that second-language learners use listening for two purposes. Similar to L1 listeners, L2 learners also listen to comprehend an incoming message. However, in addition to this, second language learners use listening to assist with their language acquisition. Richards draws on theories of second language acquisition (e.g. Selinker's Interlanguage, 1972) to help explain how this occurs.

Drawing on Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, he notes that learners first notice features of aural input that are different from or are nonexistent in their current interlanguage. Once these features have been noticed, they are considered "intake" and are stored in memory. However, at this point, Richards (2005) notes that language development has yet to take place. He states that "the learner has to try to incorporate new linguistic items into his or her language repertoire" (p. 89) to facilitate interlanguage restructuring. Citing Tarone and Liu (1995), Richards notes that learners need opportunities to experiment with using newly noticed linguistic items in order for them to be incorporated into their language system. Once these new items have been included within the learner's repertoire, they are then considered acquired.

While there are few studies investigating the effects of aural input on language acquisition, the ones presented here provide some evidence that language learners can use listening to assist in acquiring aspects of pronunciation (Trofimovich, Lightbown, Halter, & Song, 2009) and developing lexical (Vidal, 2003) and syntactic (De Jong, 2005) knowledge. To investigate the effects of target-language input (listening and reading) on pronunciation acquisition, Trofimovich et al. (2009) performed a two-year study in an ESL context. Subjects in the target group were provided with input-only activities, without any opportunities for production to limit the effects of output on pronunciation acquisition. The authors concluded that exposure to L2 input can assist in acquiring accurate and fluent target-language pronunciation. Within the article, they describe how L2 learners use listening to acquire aspects of pronunciation. The authors note that learners notice regularities in phonology and morphosyntax after they have experienced lexical items multiple times in different contexts (reading and listening). After noticing, learners make generalizations about how lexical items are pronounced based on these perceived regularities. For example, at the phonological level, learners "could infer that English /t/ at the onset of a stressed syllable is aspirated (e.g., *Tom* and *toy*), and at the level of morphosyntax, they could notice the structural configuration of the English possessive (e.g., *Tom's toy* and *Jane's dog*)" (p. 633). As learners become more adept at distinguishing between phonemes and morphosyntax in listening texts, their ability to produce accurate and fluent speech also improves.

Second language listeners can also use listening to acquire new lexical items. Vidal (2003) outlined four factors that influence vocabulary acquisition from listening: *predictability from word form and parts*, *type of word*, *type of word elaboration*, and *occurrence of word. Predictability from word form and parts* relates to learners being able to recognize word cognates and words similar to a students' L1. Vidal claims it is easier for L2 learners to recognize and add new word cognates into their lexicon if they have already created a mental representation for a related word.

Another predictor of lexical acquisition from listening is *type of word*. Lexical items needed to understand the overall context of the aural message (e.g. content words) are found to be understood more often than those that are not pertinent to doing so (e.g. function words), regardless of how frequently they are used. *Type of word* also relates to syntax. Syntactic knowledge (e.g. parts of speech) helps with vocabulary acquisition because if students are able to understand the syntactic relationship between words in a sentence, they can more easily comprehend the meaning of the listening text. *Type of word elaboration* also contributes to vocabulary acquisition through listening. If a word is elaborated on, the item has a higher likelihood of being acquired. Words in the Vidal study were elaborated either explicitly, by defining or giving descriptions of the terms, or implicitly, by paraphrasing or giving synonyms. Finally, the *occurrence of word*, where a term is repeated in multiple contexts also helps in acquiring new vocabulary. However, the study did find that repetition alone is insufficient at acquiring new words. Vidal suggests that more focused attention and effort on individual items would lead to greater vocabulary gain.

In addition to using syntax to gain new lexical items, second language learners can also acquire new syntactic structures through listening. De Jong (2005) found that if learners focus explicitly on a particular grammatical structure, their receptive knowledge of the structure could be developed. He claimed that though learners are able to build a grammatical knowledge base through listening, it does not prevent errors from being made in production. In other words, learners are able to receptively comprehend syntax through listening, but struggle to produce grammatically accurate language without sufficient opportunities to practice doing so.

So far this paper has shown how second language learners can use listening to assist in their language acquisition. The following section will examine how listening has been used to help learners acquire listening skills.

## Acquisition of Listening Skills

This section will begin with an examination of what happens as second language learners listen and the processes involved in doing so.

### *Second Language Listening Processes*

Researchers (e.g. Mendelsohn, 1998; Wilson, 2003) claim that while listening, language learners use *bottom-up* and/or *top-down* processes to comprehend speech. Field (2004) notes that these terms, which will be described in this section, refer to the direction of mental processing, where "[i]n a 'bottom-up' process, small

('lower level') units are progressively reshaped into larger ones" (p. 364) and "in a 'top-down' process, larger units exercise an influence over the way in which smaller ones are perceived" (p.364).

**Bottom-up processing.** The *bottom-up* processing model follows a traditional view of communication where a message is encoded and sent to the receiver, who then decodes it and understands the message (Shannon, 1948). The most significant aspect of this model is the literal message. It neglects the importance of contextual factors, such as the physical environment and the relationship between speakers (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005), and co-textual information, or what has already been said in the input (Field, 2008).

Field (2008) claims the most important component of the *bottom-up* processing model is *decoding*. *Decoding* is defined as "translating the speech signal into speech sounds, words, and clauses, and finally into a literal meaning" (p. 125). The processes learners use when decoding input are similar to those described in *bottom-up primacy*, a listening comprehension model presented by Marslen-Wilson (1989). During *bottom-up primacy*, a listener attends to a sound when it is heard and simultaneously tries to make connections to lexical items with the same sound stored in memory. All words that possess that sound are immediately activated and made available to the learner. As more sounds are heard, the list of available words becomes narrower and the learner is able to match the word heard to one in memory. In addition to word-matching, Field (2008) notes that for *decoding*, learners also engage in perceptual parsing, where grammatical patterns from the input are matched to those within student interlanguage to arrive at a literal meaning of the message. To complete the *bottom-up* processing routine, listeners gradually expand their comprehension to phrasal and sentential level chunks of language to eventually understand the entire listening text (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). This assumes that if learners are able to decode the entire message, they will be able to understand it. However, as described here, after *decoding*, the learner is left with a literal interpretation of the input, absent of any context to assist in meaningfully understanding the complete message.

**Top-down processing and metacognition.** *Top-down* processing involves using schemata to assist in comprehending an aural message. Field (2008) notes that learners draw from both context, or global knowledge of a topic, and co-text, or knowledge of what has been previously said in the text, to construct meaning. He notes that they do this for two purposes: to "provide extra evidence that assists the decoding process" (p. 131), and to "enrich the raw meaning of the utterance and make

it relevant to the current situation" (p. 131). In other words, listeners use *top-down* processes in order to build meaning to assist in decoding the overall message if they are unable to comprehend words from the input and to enhance their understanding of what was heard.

*Top-down* processing has been closely linked with metacognition in the second language listening research (e.g. Vandergrift, 2004). Though much of the literature on metacognition is limited to its use in the classroom, it has been found to be important in helping language learners comprehend an aural message (Goh, 1997; Vandergrift, 1997; Vandergrift, 2002; Vandergrift, 2004). Metacognition is defined as the learners "knowledge about learning" (Wenden, 1998, p. 516). Flavell (1979) first used the term in 1979 when he identified three types of metacognitive knowledge: *person, task,* and *strategy*. Vandergrift (2002) developed these concepts further and defines *person* knowledge as "knowledge of the cognitive and affective factors that facilitate learning and what learners know about themselves" (p. 568). *Task* knowledge is defined as "knowledge of the purpose and nature of the task, its demands on the learner, and when deliberate effort is needed" (p. 568). *Strategy* knowledge involves knowledge about "effective strategies for particular tasks as well as how to best approach language learning" (p. 568). If learners are able to develop their person, task, and strategy knowledge, they will be more successful in performing listening tasks (Goh, 2008; Lam, 2009; Vandergrift, 2004).

In order to increase metacognitive knowledge, learners need to be guided through activities that raise their awareness to the process of listening (Goh, 1997; Goh, 2008; Vandergrift, 2002). Goh (1997) notes that this can be done by introducing metacognitive strategies at each stage of a listening lesson (pre-, while-, and post-listening). Vandergrift (1997), expanding on earlier work by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), outlined three-metacognitive strategy categories that can be introduced as a three-stage process as Goh suggested: *planning*, *monitoring*, and *evaluation*. In the *planning* stage, learners are encouraged to prepare to listen to the upcoming listening text. Teachers can assist learners with this by activating schemata and helping make predictions based on available contextual clues. In the *monitoring* stage, learners monitor their own comprehension of the text by evaluating their predictions as they listen. In the final stage of the process, *evaluation*, strategies are checked for their use and evaluated for their effectiveness. At this stage, learners reflect back on the strategies they used and assess them on how well they used them and how effective the strategies were at helping them comprehend the listening. As learners become more aware of these metacognitive strategies, they increase their metacognitive knowledge and become more successful at comprehending listening texts (Chand, 2007).

Now that this paper has examined what happens as an L2 learner listens, as well as what role metacognition plays in listening, attention now turns to pedagogical approaches to listening. The following section will investigate the current approach to developing listening skills and highlight its strengths and weaknesses in meeting learner needs.

### *Current Approach to Teaching Listening*

In today's language-learning classroom, listening and listening comprehension have come to mean the same thing (Richards, 2005). The current standard approach to pedagogical listening, what Field (2008) refers to as the comprehension approach (CA), has resulted from this commonly accepted viewpoint. Lessons focusing on this approach involve listening to medium-length recorded passages and answering questions designed to gauge learners' comprehension of the text. Field has outlined a typical CA lesson sequence involving three stages: *Pre-listening*, *Listening*, and *Post-listening*. In the *pre-listening* stage, students are introduced to critical vocabulary, or lexical items vital to understanding the message, to assist in comprehending the text. The context of the recording is also provided to activate learner schemata to assist in understanding. In the *listening* stage, students are asked to listen to the text at two levels: *extensive* and *intensive*. In the *extensive* listening phase, learners listen generally to the recording to familiarize themselves with the speakers and the overall context, after which they are asked to answer content questions assessing their global comprehension. The following phase calls for *intensive* listening, where the recording is played multiple times to allow learners to focus on the details of the text. Students answer pre-set multiple-choice questions designed to gauge their local comprehension. Finally, in the *post-listening* stage, students listen to the text and read along with the transcript to identify unknown or misunderstood words or utterances. Field notes that recent researchers (e.g. Wilson, 2008) have claimed that this three-stage process for teaching listening has become the core for many listening methodologies.

***Strengths and weaknesses of the CA.*** While the comprehension approach is widely used in language classrooms today, the approach has been recently challenged by researchers in the English language teaching (ELT) field (e.g., Richards, 2005) as being insufficient in adequately developing listening ability. Field (2008) critically analyzed the CA and has noted many drawbacks to the approach. Firstly, he states that the CA is misleading in that it draws too close of a parallel between reading and listening. Readers have the benefit of a standardized spelling system, whereas sounds

in speech can vary from person to person and utterance to utterance, making it more demanding for listeners to comprehend the input. Also, word boundaries in writing are clearly marked by spaces between words, allowing readers to easily make distinctions between lexical items. However, gaps between words in speech tend to be less clear and contain elements of connected speech (Brown & Kondo-Brown, 2006), which requires the listener to determine word boundaries themselves. Field also notes the difference in permanence between reading and listening texts. While reading is more of a recursive activity, allowing the learner to look back on what was previously written to check for overall comprehension, listeners are unable to do so because of the transitory nature of listening. Learners must hold the information they hear in their memory and carry it forward as they continue to listen in order to gain a more complete understanding of the message.

Other researchers (Brown, 1986; Sheerin, 1987) have criticized the current approach for testing listening, while doing little to actually teach it. Comprehension questions used in classrooms with the CA allow for judgments to be made about learners and their needs, but do not assist in improving their listening ability.

Another major criticism of the comprehension approach is the lack of a progressive curriculum designed to systematically improve listening competence. Field notes that courses designed in the CA present progressively more difficult listening texts and tasks and leave students to their own means to cope with them. Unfortunately, while the CA provides students with opportunities to experience the target language and answer questions based on what they hear, it fails to provide them with the necessary skills or strategies to cope with the demands of the texts and tasks they face.

Though weaknesses of the comprehension approach have been noted, it does possess some important benefits. Field (2008) notes that it provides learners with extensive exposure to samples of natural language, giving students opportunities to make sense out of the authentic language they hear. He claims that expert listeners are "able to process spoken input in a highly automatic way" (p. 32) and in order to develop these automatic processing skills in language learners, repeated exposure to natural target language is essential. Another benefit of the CA is its assistance to students in passing exams. Field claims that many international listening tests have adopted the CA assumptions. Providing students with opportunities to engage in tasks similar to those they will face on listening tests would assist them in developing test-task familiarity. Being familiar with test-tasks has been found to be beneficial to test-takers because they allow for students to devote less cognitive attention to understanding the nature of the task, and more to the aural input provided for the task (Buck, 2001). In sum, despite the many criticisms of the comprehension approach, the

benefits can be helpful for second language learners.

Thus far in the review, clear deficiencies of the current approach to second language listening pedagogy have been highlighted. The next section will examine alternative approaches in search of a more efficient way to develop listening skills.

### *The Process Approach*

Within the literature, very little has been devoted to addressing the deficiencies of the current approach to listening. However, Field (2008) has recently emerged as one of the prominent figures in the field today and has presented an alternative approach for developing language listening skills, the process approach. As noted above, one of the major criticisms of the comprehension approach is the inability to develop listening skills systematically. The process approach attempts to address this need while providing opportunities for listening instructors to teach learners how to listen. Field notes that listener processes are represented by observable learner behaviour. This implies that behaviours of expert listeners, representing their advanced processing, can be identified. Once these behaviours have been established, listening processes in less successful listeners can be developed by setting target behaviours for them to emulate. As less successful listeners begin to behave more as expert listeners, their processes develop.

Field provides a list of listening processes that expert listeners use and has divided them into two categories: *decoding* processes and *meaning building* processes. The processes in each category are divided into components (e.g. recognizing consonant clusters for *decoding*; relating syntax to context for *meaning building*). This allows the processes, represented by listener behaviour, to be targeted for improvement. As less successful listeners develop their component-processes, their overall listening skills improve. This potential for progressive development addresses the necessity for a systematic learning program that allows listening instructors to teach learners how to listen, which has been previously noted as being a criticism of the CA.

Since the ability to develop listening processes has now been established, the issue becomes what processes are most effective at developing listening skills systematically. For this, the paper draws on the existing research on listening process development.

Despite the large number of studies devoted to processes, little research has been conducted on how these processes can be used to systematically develop listening skills. Within the literature, methods through which listening processes can be developed have been somewhat contradictory. Many researchers (e.g. Tsui &

Fullillove, 1998) support explicit instruction designed to develop *bottom-up* processes needed for *decoding*. Field claims the degree to which listeners decode input indicates their listening skill ability. According to him, expert listeners possess highly automatic *decoding* routines. Expert decoders match words from input with words in the lexicon *accurately*, with high precision, *rapidly*, without having to recall groups of sounds, and *effortlessly*, without heavy demands on attention. However, undeveloped decoding processes in novice listeners force them to focus much attention on trying to understand what words they hear, leaving little attention for building meaning (Tyler, 2001). To assist weaker listeners in becoming more expert-like, Field (2008) proposes the processes involved in *decoding* be practiced through targeted mini-listening sessions in the classroom. He suggests sessions focusing on raising student awareness to connected speech, for which the benefits for improving listening ability in the language classroom have been noted (e.g. Brown & Kondo-Brown, 2006), would assist in this aim.

In contrast to this view, others (e.g. Osada, 2001) claim that instructional focus on the development of *top-down* processes to assist in *meaning building* are more effective in improving L2 listening comprehension. As noted above, when building meaning, L2 listeners use *top-down* processes and apply schemata to assist in understanding the aural message. In this capacity, *top-down* processes help L2 listeners cope with the input when their *bottom-up* processes and *decoding* skills are deficient. Field (2008) claims that *meaning building* and *top-down* processes actually serve two purposes (as written about above): One, to assist in coping with undeveloped *decoding*, and the other to enhance the understanding of the message for more adept decoders. Field claims that *decoding* and *bottom-up* processes are also important to *meaning building*. If a listener is unable to decode a word from input, or decodes something inaccurately, the meaning of the utterance can change. From this perspective, both *decoding* and *meaning building* are mutually beneficial to the L2 listener as both contribute to understanding the meaning of a listening text.

While the existing literature is divided regarding which set of processes deserves developmental focus, Field presents a systematic integrated approach. He suggests emphasizing *decoding* processes first, with *meaning building* processes used to support deficiencies in *bottom-up* processing skills. He notes that as listeners begin to decode with greater automaticity, focus should shift to emphasizing *meaning building* processes that enrich the meaning of the message. At this point, lessons would continue to include *decoding* processes, but enhancing the meaning of the text should become the focus. Developing listening processes in this systematic manner could satisfy the need noted above for progressive listening skill development in language learners.

In sum, the process approach appears to be an attractive alternative to the current approach as it fills the gaps of the CA presented in this review. Unlike the comprehension approach, the process approach systematically improves L2 listening skills by developing the processes involved in listening. These processes are represented by observable behaviours that can be used to set as goals for novice L2 learners to achieve. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of the process approach is mostly speculative at this point. It has only recently been introduced into the literature, and studies to provide empirical evidence to support its effectiveness are needed.

### An Eclectic Approach

Despite the many potential benefits of the process approach, practically implementing it into the listening classroom may present a few challenges. Because listening lessons today are predominantly based on the CA, it would be unreasonable to expect language teachers to immediately discard these lessons in favour of those based on the process approach. Doing so would render the vast number of available resources for the current approach obsolete. Therefore, in order to preserve these resources, I suggest an eclectic approach similar to the diagnostic approach proposed by Field (2008) be implemented; one that uses the comprehension approach as an assessment tool to identify deficient listening processes that can be targeted for development.

Within this new approach, lessons based on the CA could be used as a diagnostic tool to assess listener strengths and weaknesses. Brown (1986) notes that information collected from diagnostic assessment would help identify behavioural patterns of unsuccessful listeners. Once these behaviours are identified, instructors could engage in intensive mini-sessions specifically designed to improve listening deficiencies (e.g. connected speech to assist in *decoding*). In essence, the CA lesson sequence would be used as an assessment component, and based on its results, listening could be taught by improving undeveloped processes (Field, 2008). To achieve this, target behaviours, representing listening processes, could be systematically set for less successful listeners to achieve. As learners meet these target behaviours, their listening processes inherently become more expert-like and their listening skills improve. In this way, the comprehension approach and process approach could be used together to meet the needs of second language listeners.

The paper will conclude with a recapitulation of the concepts discussed in this review as well as the pedagogical implications they have.

## CONCLUSION

This review has addressed many issues within the language listening literature. It has shown how aspects of another language, specifically pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, can be acquired through listening. To gain linguistic knowledge, language listeners first notice new linguistic features in aural input and then produce them in context so they can become incorporated within their language system. The paper has highlighted the need for more research into how listening assists language acquisition. There are very few studies that have explored this area, and more research is needed. The results of these studies would assist language instructors in helping students become more autonomous learners, reducing dependence on classroom instruction.

The review has also investigated the current approach to second language listening. Examination of the approach revealed its many inadequacies, particularly its inability to systematically develop listening skills. The review presented alternatives to the current approach in search of a way to satisfy the needs of second language listeners left unmet by the CA and pedagogical models based upon it. An eclectic approach was proposed as a possible solution to the current approach. While this approach is new, listening instructors can be educated about how to implement it into the language classroom. Since most listening lessons follow the CA lesson sequence, using it as an assessment tool should not require additional training. However, using tasks to identify listener weaknesses may require some attention. To address this need, instructors would need to be educated about the listening processes learners use when listening. Knowledge of these processes will allow them to identify learner deficiencies and help in developing a systematic curriculum designed to improve them. Teachers would also need sample activities (available in Field, 2008) to serve as models for how classroom tasks can be used to improve particular processes. Given the proper support, listening instructors could use the eclectic approach presented in this review to satisfy the needs of language learners as they seek to develop their listening skills.

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