Facilitating Listening Comprehension: Acquiring Successful Strategies

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Abstract

Research into the effectiveness of cognitive and metacognitive strategies has indicated that focusing attention and activating learners’ memories is necessary before they are able to internalize linguistic input. It has become evident since initial studies in learner autonomy were conducted in the 1970’s that successful learners are cognitively engaged in and meta-cognitively aware of their role in the learning process, monitor their learning, demonstrate the capacity and willingness to manage their own learning, seek to create opportunities to learn, and avail themselves of resources and opportunities for feedback. This paper will examine the application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to the process of second language listening and suggest ways that instructors can help their students increase their comprehension of spoken English.

Introduction

This paper will explain ways in which the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to organize learning and interact with input can improve learners’ comprehension of spoken English, and in turn enhance the process of language learning/acquisition. The paper will illustrate ways in which listeners can use strategies to facilitate the listening process, and how instructors can promote the development and use of these strategies in the classroom.

Listening Comprehension and Language Learning

Listening comprehension has often been seen as a passive activity. It is, on the contrary, an active process in which the listener must discriminate among sounds, understand words and grammar, interpret intonation and other prosodic clues, and retain information gathered long enough to interpret it in the context or setting in which the exchange takes place. In short, listening is a complex activity which requires substantial mental effort.
Listening comprehension as a separate component of language learning and instruction came into its own only after long and significant debate regarding its validity. A large volume of research has demonstrated the critical role of input, and particularly “comprehensible input” in language acquisition, (cf. Krashen, (1982); O’Malley, (1985); Dunkel, (1991); Feyten, 1991) underlining the primacy of the role played by listening comprehension in second language teaching.

It has been widely acknowledged for some time that listening comprehension plays a vital role in facilitating language learning. According to Gary (1975) giving pre-eminence to the development of listening comprehension, particularly in the early stages of language learning (and instruction) provides four main advantages: cognitive, efficiency, utility and affective advantages.

The cognitive advantage of an initial emphasis on listening comprehension is that it follows a natural order of acquisition, reflecting the process of first language acquisition. Processing and decoding speech requires recognition knowledge, which are a natural initial step; encoding and producing speech require retrieval knowledge, which can only occur after speech has been comprehended and stored in memory. If we insist that learners place what has not yet been thoroughly assimilated into memory, it will result in cognitive overload, and the information will soon be forgotten. This explains to some extent why learners of limited proficiency have difficulty listening for accurate meaning and learning to produce speech at the same time. Short-term memory is not capable of retaining all of the necessary information and learners consequently rely on native language habits when forced to speak before they have fully comprehended the input. Not only does placing the emphasis on immediate speech production leave little room for listening, it leaves little room for language comprehension, ie understanding meaningful messages so that language can be learned.

Related to the cognitive advantage is the efficiency advantage; language learning is more efficient if learners are not required to immediately produce large portions of the language material to which they are exposed. This allows for more meaningful language use early in the course of instruction, as learners are able to employ the limited resources available in short-term memory to the task of deriving and retaining meaning. Furthermore, emphasizing the development of listening comprehension at the outset of instruction is more efficient because students are exposed to controlled, “comprehensible” input from various sources, rather than from the imperfect utterances of classmates. Recall here that the discussion is limited to the comprehension of language input, not the issue of “ingrained errors” that many instructors erroneously believe to derive from student-student L2 interaction. Controlled listening input in the initial stages of study provides a more realistic and natural model than peer/classmate speech, which may be poorly formed, poorly pronounced, or require an inordinate amount of class time to comprehend.
The third advantage, the utility advantage, addresses the usefulness of receptive skills. Research has demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of their communication time engaged in listening, 25-30% speaking, 10-15% reading and less than 10% writing. (Gilman and Moody, 1984:331) It seems logical to conclude from this that language learners will make greater use of listening comprehension skills than other language skills. While speakers can use paralinguistics and other means of getting their message across, listeners must adjust to a speaker’s rate of speech, accent, and choice of vocabulary. This is perhaps the most salient reason for teaching listening comprehension strategies and provides a rationale for including listening activities throughout a language program, even at more advanced levels.

The fourth advantage gained from placing emphasis on listening comprehension is the affective, or psychological advantage. Absent the pressure of early speech production, there is potentially less risk of embarrassment to students who are uncertain that they can make themselves understood. When this pressure is eliminated, learners are able to relax and direct their attention to comprehending speech, developing listening skills, and internalizing vocabulary and structure that will facilitate the emergence of other language skills. Moreover, focusing on listening in the early stages promotes a sense of accomplishment and success; this in turn fosters motivation to continue learning (Rubin, 1988:1)

In short, listening comprehension is a set of highly integrated skills, all of which play an important role in the process of language acquisition and the development of related language skills. Consequently, an awareness and deployment of effective listening comprehension strategies can help learners make the most of the language input to which they are exposed.

**Listening Comprehension Strategies**

O’Malley and Chamot (1990) have validated a body of language learning strategies and developed an accompanying classification scheme grounded in cognitive theory. Their scheme categorizes strategies as being either cognitive or metacognitive in nature. Metacognitive strategies refer to what learners do to oversee, regulate or direct their learning and include planning, monitoring and evaluating stages, which mirror the pre-task, on-task and post-task activities featured in many texts. Cognitive strategies, on the other hand, refer to strategies used to manipulate the input or material, or to apply a specific skill or strategy to a particular task. A third category, socio-affective strategies, refers to learning that takes place during cooperative interaction with classmates, questions addressed to the teacher, or techniques for the reduction of anxiety. A useful diagram of O’Malley and Chamot’s scheme can be found in Robbins’ (2000:15-17) The Learning Strategies Handbook.

While second language strategy research has generated an enormous amount of interest in
recent years, the number of studies devoted specifically to listening comprehension remains small, and the number of studies which investigate the use of strategies in listening is even more limited (Rubin, 1994). Nevertheless, recent studies on the differences in strategy use between relatively more and less effective listeners underline the potential metacognitive strategies possess for enhancing second language listening. (cf. O’Malley and Chamot (1990); Vandergrift (1997). Furthermore, the limited number of studies so far in listening strategy instruction suggest that learners can be instructed in strategy use, and that doing so enhances their performance on listening tasks. (cf. O’Malley and Chamot (1990); Rubin (1988); Thompson and Rubin (1996). Although the research base is limited, preliminary evidence suggests that the use of metacognitive strategies helped students manage their learning more effectively, and thus capitalize on the input they receive to improve their task performance.

Development of Metacognitive Awareness

In addition to the preliminary evidence on strategy instruction presented above, research has indicated the potential metacognition holds for developing what might be termed a “metastrategic” awareness among learners, in a nutshell a “what could/should I do instead?” approach to listening comprehension. Such an approach would combine metacognitive awareness of the available options and self-regulation strategies with cognitive strategies for interpreting and manipulating linguistic input to increase comprehension.

Means of introducing such an approach to learners are varied. At the introductory level, a presentation of strategies, their role in language comprehension and a survey of the skills students employ is suggested (see Holden, 2001). Another means that has been suggested is to give the students a text or listening passage in a language other than English and discuss the means available to them for interpreting it. Such an approach can increase awareness of the features and cues available for deriving meaning from a test or listening passage, and promotes the strategy of selective attention. (Mendelsohn, 1994).

The Listening Process: A Cyclical Approach

The sequencing of listening tasks into pre-listening, task-listening and post-listening sections has been a mainstay in the teaching of listening comprehension for the better part of two decades. Such an orientation is pedagogically sound, and, in so far as it serves to direct learners toward a consistent approach to planning, monitoring and evaluating their comprehension, highly advisable. However, it falls short of being an adequate approach to the development of actual listening strategies: all too often the cognitive aspects of the process subsumed under these categories are underplayed or inconsistently presented. If listening tasks are designed in such a way as (or the instructor is able post-hoc) to “strongly encourage” learners to make consistent
use of particular strategies at appropriate points in the listening process in order to comprehend the input, and this approach is used systematically, learners would in the end stand a far greater chance of improving their listening ability.

The pre-listening component should include activities that prepare learners for what they will hear, what they will do, and how the task can be approached. Initially, students need to make conscious any knowledge they have of the content, background, setting, participants and goals or purposes of the exchange they will hear, and the vocabulary likely to be used in that setting or situation. Next, a purpose for listening must be established: what information is required, and in how much detail. Finally, ways in which the task might be approached can be presented and weighed before listening begins.

Pre-listening activities help students make decisions about what to listen for and where to focus their attention while listening, while encouraging them to bring existing cultural, linguistic and personal knowledge to bear on the task. A checklist of strategies learners can employ illustrates some of the strategies that might be used in the pre-listening component.

1) Use Visual or Environmental Clues
   Strategies: activate background knowledge, infer, predict, selectively attend, provide context, associate

2) Brainstorm words and phrases you might hear
   Strategies: direct attention, predict, activate background knowledge, selectively attend, infer, associate

3) Focus on Key Vocabulary
   Strategies: scan, selectively attend, infer, evaluate, activate background knowledge, group, contextualize

4) Think of a Synonym (or antonym)
   Strategies: brainstorm, activate background knowledge, infer, substitute, paraphrase, associate

5) Use the Vocabulary / Rehearse
   Strategies: activate background knowledge, plan and organize, use the language, infer, contextualize, predict, cooperate, send & receive info, repeat, practice

6) Personalize the Information
   Strategies: selectively attend, activate background knowledge, contextualize, personalize
7) Think Ahead
   Strategies: activate background knowledge, contextualize, predict, use mental imagery, use the language

8) Relate the situation to your own experience
   Strategies: use mental imagery, contextualize, personalize, use the language

9) Use Your Imagination
   Strategies: use mental imagery, contextualize, personalize, use the language

10) Use Textual Clues
    Strategies: set goals, organize & plan, predict, self management, talk through

11) Identify your Purpose:
    a) Strategies: set goals, organize & plan, self management, selective attention
    b) Specific goal: ID
       Strategies: set goals, organize & plan, self management, pay selective attention, focus on key words

During the listening activity itself, students should be encouraged to monitor their level of comprehension and make decisions about appropriate strategy use. Students need to continuously and consistently monitor their level of comprehension and to match the input they receive with the predictions they made in the pre-listening activities, and for internal consistency with the input they are receiving. This is a highly complex task, made all the more difficult because teacher intervention is virtually impossible at this stage. Thus, consistent and systematic training in the use of strategies appropriate to particular tasks and extensive pre-listening activities need to be incorporated into any program of listening instruction. Explicating and rehearsing these skills before students begin listening may be advisable; on the other hand, demonstrating afterwards that students could have understood more by having employed the strategies may have more impact, and convince more students to make use of them.

1) Ask yourself questions
   Strategies: self monitor, clarification, direct attention, verify predictions. ask questions, predict

2) Use grammar as a guide
   Strategies: activate grammar knowledge, predict, direct attention, selectively attend, deduce, group and classify. use linguistic clues, analyse expressions

3) Listen for groups of words
Strategies: activate background knowledge, predict, direct attention, selectively attend, group, infer, deduce, analyse expressions, use linguistic clues

4) Control the input
   Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, self monitor. ask questions, confirm understanding, self management, conversational management

5) Listen for emphasis/ stress
   Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, use grammar as a guide, deduce, repeat, recognize formula or pattern

6) Listen for the intonation pattern
   Strategies: activate prior knowledge, direct attention, predict, selectively attend, infer, use grammar as a guide, repeat, recognize formula or pattern

7) Re-confirm your purpose
   Strategies: direct attention, activate background knowledge, selectively attend, deduce, infer, monitor, repeat, compare & contrast

8) Think ahead
   Strategies: direct attention, activate background knowledge, predict, infer, deduce, monitor, confirm

9) Substitute
   Strategies: direct attention, activate background knowledge, selectively attend, monitor, deduce, problem solving, use grammar as a guide

10) Identify signalling phrases and discourse markers used to show the end of the speaking turn or shifts in topic. Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, predict, infer, analyze phrases, recognize formulas & patterns

11) Shadow
    Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, remember information, repeat, use the language, monitor

12) Take notes
    Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, remember information, highlight, summarize, evaluate
13) Confirm and clarify your understanding

*Strategies: ask questions, remember information, problem solving, use the language, evaluate, monitor*

Post-listening activities provide an opportunity for learners to evaluate their level of comprehension, compare and discuss strategies and reflect on alternative approaches to the task. Pair, small group or class discussions, in the students’ first language where necessary, are the simplest way to encourage this. More important than getting the “right answer” is how the answer was obtained, as this knowledge can become part of the students’ skills repertoire and applied to successive tasks and in other contexts. The connection between pre-listening and post-listening also needs to be made explicit, so that learners can develop the ability to better prepare for and predict what they will encounter by broadening the range of strategies they employ. Performance checklists or listening protocols can provide a good starting point for discussions. Such approaches encourage students to reflect on the steps taken (or not taken) at various points in the listening activity by themselves and their peers, and enable them to see which strategies they (and others) employ most frequently, and which they tend to neglect. Discussing their approach with classmates whose approaches to listening differ should help students adjust their strategies and broaden their skills repertoire. In the process of doing so, and applying what they’ve learned from their peers, learners should gain access to more language, making content more comprehensible. Some post-listening strategies learners should employ include:

1) Confirm your Predictions

*Strategies: ask questions, remember information, evaluate, monitor, predict, compare & contrast, ask for confirmation*

2) Paraphrase

*Strategies: remember information, use the language, highlight, summarize, evaluate, monitor*

3) Assess Your Success

*Strategies: selectively attend, evaluate, monitor, verify, record*

4) Note Down what you Remember

*Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, remember information, use the language, monitor, record*

5) Read and Check

*Strategies: use the language, confirm, compare, evaluate, monitor, remember information*

6) Listen and Read
Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, remember information, use the language, evaluate, monitor, record

7) Listen, Read and Repeat
   Strategies: direct attention, selectively attend, imitate, remember information, use the language, monitor, evaluate

8) Organize and Record New Vocabulary
   Strategies: take notes, selectively attend, remember information, record

9) Evaluate the Success of Your Strategies
   Strategies: selectively attend, remember information, use the language, monitor, evaluate, record

10) Evaluate Your Learning
    Strategies: Self management, selectively attend, remember information, use the language, evaluate, monitor, record

11) Use the vocabulary
    Strategies: remember information, use the language, summarize, transfer

12) Confirm and Clarify Your Understanding
    Strategies: ask questions, remember information, problem solving, use the language, evaluate, monitor

By adopting a cyclical approach to listening in which pre-listening, on-task listening and post-listening activities, each of which in turn incorporate appropriate, viable complementary strategies, we are encouraging students to listen to confirm, as well as to comprehend. Such an approach engages the student in the tasks more deeply, as they have posited something and are listening to confirm predictions, not simply to glean information. Listening should be presented to learners, particularly beginners, as a cyclical rather than as a linear process, as students all too often tend to view it in the latter terms. Interpreted improperly, “Could you play the tape again?” might seem to indicate a linear approach; if we present the tape as a loop, it may in fact encourage learners to take a different view of the process of listening. It is facility with the process, not simply the final product, that indicates the development of viable skills that will enable comprehension in other settings and situations. An emphasis on listening comprehension which incorporates awareness-raising at the metacognitive level with the application and consistent evaluation of of listening strategies at the cognitive level will help learners more successfully capitalize on the language input they receive and, theoretically, lead them to achieve greater success in other areas of language learning.
References


