


December 2009 — Volume 13, Number 3

Listening in the Language Classroom		
<b>Author:</b>	John Field (2008)	
<b>Publisher:</b>	Cambridge: Cambridge University Press	
<b>Pages</b>	<b>ISBN</b>	<b>Price</b>
Pp. x + 366	978-0-521-68570-2 (paper)	\$35.00 US



Listening tends to be the most challenging skill for many second language learners to acquire, and it is probably the most difficult to teach successfully. Its transient, intangible nature makes it difficult to analyze and practise in the same way as other language skills. As a result, the criticism that listening is tested rather than taught in the classroom is often warranted. The difficulty for many teachers lies in finding an alternative to the ‘practice makes perfect’ comprehension approach that is generally adopted. In *Listening in the Language Classroom*, John Field examines these issues and proposes such alternatives, either by adapting current practice to make it more suitable to a communicative methodology, or through more radical alternatives, focusing on the process of listening.

*Listening in the Language Classroom* is divided into six parts. The initial background section briefly traces the history of teaching listening, leading up to current practice. This is then critically assessed, the author arguing that a comprehension based approach echoing that used in teaching L2 reading, with an emphasis on product (answering comprehension questions) rather than process is not the most constructive way of improving L2 listening skills. Field follows this up in the second section by suggesting ways of adapting the comprehension approach, such as introducing a broader range of listening types and tasks, encouraging greater learner interaction in the classroom and developing learner independence beyond it.

These first two sections are both interesting and well-argued although the material presented is not ground-breaking. More radical alternatives are presented in Part III where Field builds up his argument for a process-based methodology, going on to fully explain this process view of listening in Part IV. This is the core of the book, and overall it proposes a coherent and persuasive alternative to current practice. With the busy teacher in mind, it is also a section that can be dipped into easily, as it contains clearly marked tables of short exercises for practising specific processes. Many of these could easily be added to an existing syllabus.

Taking a process view of listening, Field discusses the importance of distinguishing between the two major operations involved in the skill, decoding and meaning-building, and of understanding the relationship between them. Decoding is concerned with “translating the speech signal into speech sounds, words and clauses, and finally into a literal meaning” (p. 125), and involves highly automatic processes, while meaning-building is defined as “adding to the bare meaning provided by decoding and relating it to what has been said before” (p. 125), involving more rational processes. Which of the two, the author asks, should we prioritize?

The ensuing discussion serves to highlight the importance of developing decoding skills which allow the input to be processed more automatically, allowing context to be used to enrich understanding of the message, rather than to compensate for gaps in understanding where decoding has failed. This points to the value of listening instruction that focuses on developing these decoding processes, particularly for novice and less skilled listeners. Further investigation into the unreliable nature of input the listener is exposed to, i.e. features of connected speech such as assimilation, elision, reduction, together with speaker variation, underline the need for focused small-scale practice in decoding samples of connected speech.

As mentioned above, the chapters in this section are interspersed with suggestions for such practice. While some of these are already widely used, such as the phoneme discrimination exercises, others are novel, such as the exercises in syllable structure and using syllable cues which reflect the importance Field places on processing syllables. For example, in ‘graded syllables’, the teacher dictates monosyllabic words representing all possible L2 syllable patterns, starting with V, CV and VC and going on to complex patterns, for example, *A, ray, pray, spray, sprain, strained* (p. 174). This serves to introduce learners to the range of syllable types used in the L2, and encourages familiarity with the more complex of them. There are also some interesting approaches to practising lexical segmentation, such as the awareness raising exercise in which learners are instructed to write what they hear as the teacher dictates ambiguous sequences to the learners, then adds an unexpected ending, such as *a nice cream... dress* [learner writes ‘an ice cream, then has to revise it] (p. 180). This exercise in particular reflects the way that decoding is presented, that is, as an operation in which tentative matches are made, matches which then may need to be revised as more input is received.

The following chapters go on to consider larger units of speech, looking at the relationship between syntax and decoding, and intonation groups and decoding, again offering examples

of how this can be practised in small-scale exercises. The final chapters in this section focus on how to transfer the meaning-building processes in use in native language listening to L2 listening.

In the penultimate section of the book, the challenge of understanding spoken language in the real world is discussed. This includes a useful look at the use of authentic materials in the classroom, with an emphasis on ways of including these from the earliest stages of listening instruction. The following two chapters consider the use of compensatory strategies in gleaning the meaning of partially understood speech, and the potential value of training learners in the use of such strategies.

The book ends with a strong concluding chapter that summarizes the arguments made, and proposes a practical “multi-strand approach to L2 listening development” (p. 332). Field stresses the importance of the skill itself, reminding the reader, “Acquiring the ability to understand what L2 speakers say is not an optional extra. On the contrary; listening is the principal means by which learners expand their knowledge of spoken forms of the target language” (p. 334). Viewed from this perspective, the potential rewards from acquiring good listening skills provide justification for spending valuable classroom time on developing them.

Like most of Field’s published papers on listening, this book addresses both the theoretical and the practical in an accessible way. It is an invaluable addition to the existing literature for those involved in teacher training and syllabus design, offering both a new perspective on the importance of L2 listening, and ways of developing L2 listening in the classroom. It also has potential value as a teacher’s resource book, suggesting exercises that are short, simple and easily added to existing repertoires. However, as the book is marketed as primarily a theoretical resource, it is unlikely to reach a broad audience directly. Nevertheless, if the shift in perspective regarding L2 listening instruction the author aims for occurs, we can hope to see a process approach to listening integrated into teacher training courses, published materials and consequently into current practice at a broader level.

**Rachel Allan**

**Applied Language Centre, University College Dublin, Ireland**

**Rachel\_Allan@alc.ucd.ie**

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.